

A DEALER IN EMPIRE



AMELIA JOSEPHINE BURR



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EL CONDE DUQUE DE OLIVARES

From the painting by Velasquez

A DEALER IN EMPIRE

A ROMANCE

BY
AMELIA JOSEPHINE BURR

ILLUSTRATED



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TO THE MEMORY OF
HAMMOND LAMONT

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ILLUSTRATIONS

GASPARO DE GUZMAN, COUNT OF OLIVARES, 1587-
1645 *Frontispiece*

From the painting by Diego Rodriguez Velasquez
de Silva, 1599-1660.

By the courtesy of the Hispanic Society of America.

PHILIP IV., KING OF SPAIN, 1605-1665 *Facing p. 174*

From the painting by Velasquez in the Altman
Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Fine
Arts.

By the courtesy of the Museum.

FOREWORD

THIS is a story of men and women who marked their world for good and evil when Spain was the proudest of kingdoms and America a wild field for the first-comer to sow as he would. Spaniards were the pioneers in America, but bent rather on reaping than on sowing, for it is the Spanish way to say "mañana" while snatching at the treasure of to-day. The English settler who came after the Spaniard made little talk of to-morrow, but plowed his rocky acres with an eye fixed ahead down the centuries. That is one reason why this book is written for Americans to read, not in Spanish, but in English.

The man who rose the highest and fell the lowest of any statesman of his time—Olivares—was Spanish to the bone. He had a noble dream of welding the jealous independence of Portugal and the rest into a country that might conquer the world—led by him. Here is the story of how he prospered in his desire. It is not untimely, for dreams of world-conquest do not die, and each generation—even our own—has its dealers in empire.

PART I

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I

VELASQUEZ'S VISION

IT was early in the seventeenth century, in a springtime when a green veil of growing grain was hiding the Pilgrim graves from Indian spies at the new Plymouth, and Madrid, after a due season of mourning for his late Majesty Philip the Third, was a whirlpool of pomp and intrigue with young Philip the Fourth as its vortex. A great gilded coach came swaying arrogantly down the Carrera de San Geronimo, heralded by sharp cries of warning—"Room! Room for his Excellency Olivares!" Foot-passengers flattened themselves humbly against the walls to make way, among them a thin young man with a painter's portfolio clasped tightly under his arm. As the coach passed, one

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after another wiped away the splatterings of the heavy wheels with mutters of irritation. The young artist had received his full share of mud, but he stood in an ecstasy, his ardent Southern eyes full of their vision of a face at the coach window—a face like a mask of pride carved in weathered marble.

“Holy Virgin!” sighed the young man. “What a man to paint!”

He recalled himself to his business and went on to the house of the court chaplain, Fonseca, where a gently patronizing servant announced Don Diego Velasquez. One glance at the troubled face of the kind old priest was enough—Velasquez had met and conquered his disappointment before Fonseca began to pour out his regret that he had been able to do nothing at court for his young friend.

“Well,” said Velasquez, smiling, “the road back to Seville is open. I will wait till they are not too busy with politics to sit for portraits.”

“Exactly!” Fonseca assented, with relief. “You see, his Majesty has so lately come to the throne that he has hardly had time to get used to its responsibilities, and his Excellency Oli-

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vares, who would surely be your patron, being himself a Sevillano, is busy arranging affairs with the new ministers. Confusion everywhere—" Fonseca shrugged his shoulders. "It is a pity—but it is inevitable. Now if you will come later, when the machinery is running smoothly—"

Velasquez's grave smile had an ironic twist.

"I shall find the court in full swing, with Olivares behind the throne instead of Lerma. Need so slight a change make so great a stir?"

"So slight a change, do you call it?" Fonseca lowered his voice impressively. "This young Philip is destined to great things—already our poets call him the Planet-King—and his star is Olivares. That is a wonderful man, a power. What do you think he dreams of? A king, not of Castile, Portugal, Aragon, half a dozen unruly little principalities, but a king of Spain, one mighty country that he can unsheathe like a conquering sword against the world. King of Spain, and then—who knows?"

"A noble dream," said Velasquez, thoughtfully. "It sounds well."

"There is more than sound to it," Fonseca affirmed, with confidence. "You and I shall

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see that dream come true." He stopped with a rueful grimace. "You shall," he amended. "I may—old as I am."

"So that is it! Spain is to rule the world, the King is to rule Spain, and Olivares—" The young man drew one deep breath of admiration and longing. "Mother of God! What a man to paint!"

"But I am more than sorry for your disappointment," said the old priest, in friendly distress. "That you should have had this long journey in vain—"

Velasquez laid his hand on the other's shoulder with impulsive reassurance. "Never trouble your kind heart about me. I shall yet paint his Excellency—and more than once. You see, like him, I believe in my destiny." He hesitated a moment, then drew a leaf of paper from his portfolio. "And could a painter call the journey wasted that gave him this?"

Fonseca uttered a cry of admiration.

"I have no idea who she is," Velasquez went on; "I do not even know the name of the village where I saw her at a window. I sketched this from memory at my next stopping-place. Oh, but it lacks the color, though! You can-

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not get the idea of her in bare black and white. Skin clear as white flame, eyes living sapphires, and hair—" He shook his head. "I shall waste a ducat's worth and more of paint before I hit the color for that."

"She has the face of a young saint," murmured Fonseca.

"I might paint her as the Virgin in glory," said Velasquez, dreamily, studying the sketch with narrowed eyes, "and I might paint her as one of the Graces—as Lady Venus herself—" He broke off with a half-embarrassed laugh and held out his hand. "I have wasted enough of your time. Thank you for your kindness, and good-by—for the present."

"That is right—for the present. You must not lose courage by one rebuff."

"Lose courage, I?" Velasquez shook back his heavy bush of black hair. "Like his Excellency Olivares, I mean to conquer first Spain and then the world."

As he came out upon the street, his head high, his eyes brilliant with dreams, it seemed only natural that he should hear gay voices and laughter—Velasquez was a man whose spirits rose in the face of opposition. Presently, how-

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ever, he became aware of a mocking quality in the voices and the laughter, and then awakened to the fact that he was the object of the mockery. A group of ragged boys were pointing jeering fingers, and Velasquez, looking down at himself, saw that he was still spattered from head to foot with the forgotten largess of Olivares's wheels. Still grasping his precious portfolio, he brushed away the dried mud as best he could with his free hand, joining in the laugh at his own expense.

"Well," he told himself, whimsically, "one who means to conquer the world must not mind a little mud-throwing more or less." He finished his brushing and straightened himself gallantly. "Very well, your Excellency—for the present," he said aloud, with a boyish glint of mischief in his sharp eyes. "I'll paint you yet, when I come to my kingdom, and—who knows? My empire may outlast yours, and the day come when all that men remember of you is the portrait that I painted."

He went his way toward Seville, gravely, because that was his nature, but with no despondency. When he had left the city he drew rein at the parting of two roads—one the direct

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highway, the other the byroad he had traveled in coming, tempted to the digression by a paradise of blossoming orchards. It was that rising tide of spring which is at once a painter's delight and his despair—and spring in Spain has all the peculiar magic of a harsh nature's rare tenderness. He was young, and blood, not paint, ran in his veins. Arguing that one more sight of that hair might save him the cost of many color-experiments, he took the byroad that led through the village where he had seen the wonder of that face.

He had a sense of personal grievance on finding that her house was closed and shuttered in the uncompromising fashion that announces emptiness within. The soft spring twilight was gathering, and the windows of the inn near by shone warm and inviting. Velasquez turned there for comfort and information, and found them both. Touch the landlord José with the merest finger-tip of a question, and he scattered facts as a jewel-weed does seeds.

“That house? Don Jaime de Herrera lived there—a fine gentleman, but most peculiar. He died lately, and now his daughter, Doña Soledad, has gone up to Madrid to be a great

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actress like her aunt, Don Jaime's sister. You must have heard of her—La Herrera?"

Velasquez confessed his ignorance. José politely tried to excuse it.

"Perhaps it is because of Don Jaime that we have heard so much of her here in Las Espadas."

José's confidence flowed on to inattentive ears. Velasquez's fancy was busy with the names of the girl and the village—Soledad and Las Espadas—solitude and swords. Strange, ominous shadows of loneliness and death seemed to gather in his mind behind the glowing wonder of her face. Even when his head was comfortably laid on José's herb pillow the sinister combination haunted him into his dreams.

If Velasquez had taken the highroad he would have met Soledad, for, just as he was standing disconcerted before her empty house, the coach that carried La Herrera and the girl whose face shone in Velasquez's memory was rolling over the new bridge of Segovia. It was the best hour for a stranger to enter the royal city. The purple Castilian twilight lent rich color to the frowning walls, turned dinginess to

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mystery, and obliterated dirt. To Soledad it seemed a place of unlimited leisure, wealth, and beauty. The crowds in the narrow streets who stepped aside to let the coach pass were dazzling to the country girl. The men were richly clothed and carried themselves gallantly, hand on sword-hilt. The women walked with a merry little music, as if their high heels were hung with silver bells; and their garments, brilliant of color and strange of shape as tropical birds, shook out heavy perfumes with every movement. Soledad had rather expected city people to be delicate and pale, but the cheeks and lips of these smiling ladies were far redder than her own.

What color she had diminished suddenly as she saw a part of the crowd that had at first escaped her, but which even the twilight could not long keep hidden. There were only two beggars in Las Espadas, decent old crones who sat at the church door and mumbled prayers for those who gave them a coin or a little food. She had never imagined such strange, unclean deformities as she now saw writhing among the jeweled feet, brushed by the scented skirts. She drew back, sickened. Could any one bear

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to look at these creatures long enough to give them charity? Just then she saw a man who dropped an alms into a filthy, distorted hand with a vague, dreamy smile and a gesture whose careless benevolence was wonderful to her. She felt it would have been impossible for her to come so near without a shudder, and thought of the saint who shared his crust with a leper. As she leaned forward to watch the slight, boyish figure in black, her aunt, following the girl's look, nodded and smiled in salutation.

"That is Quevedo," she said.

"Quevedo!" Soledad caught her breath. "Quevedo—the poet?"

La Herrera laughed at Soledad's reverent tone. "There is only one Quevedo, just as there is—has been till now—only one La Herrera. Well, I do not grudge you the name. I shall renew my power in you—you are my second youth."

"That was Quevedo?" Soledad's eyes were wide and dark. "But I thought he was as old as you—"

La Herrera's brows contracted, and there was a touch of tartness in her answer. "Oh, Quevedo has no age. One must be human to

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grow old, and he is nothing but a walking brain. He is the spoiled child of La Corte—always being banished for some satire that hits a little too hard and recalled because the court is so dull when he is away. He knows they cannot do without him, so he says what he likes—with one limit. He never touches Olivares too heavily. A spoiled child, I say—and selfish as a cat, like all men—but I grant him this, he knows genius when he sees it. He will sit up all night writing a play for you—as he did for me, twenty years ago.”

She leaned back with a complacent sigh. Soledad, her eyes starry with dreams, gazed unseeingly out of the window till her attention was rudely caught by a glare of flames.

“The city is on fire!” she exclaimed.

“Have you never seen torchlight?” her aunt reassured her. “That is the convent of the Barefoot Carmelites—they have as many entertainments there as at the theater. We will go that way and you may have a glimpse of their Majesties—this seems to be a large affair.”

In fact, when they turned up the street their coach was stopped by a line of *alguacils*. The King and Queen were just leaving the church

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after the celebration of some special solemnity. Soledad looked with interest at the royal pair as they went down the steps, pathetically young in all their pomp. Then her fingers closed nervously on her aunt's.

"Who is that?" she whispered.

"The Count and Countess of Olivares."

It was the man, not the woman, who had fixed Soledad's attention—a man in the early thirties, slightly stooped as if he carried a heavy burden on his powerful shoulders, but, even so, conspicuously tall. As he raised his dark, heavy-lidded eyes toward the coach window where the girl's face, raised above the crowd, shone in the torchlight, they suddenly out-glittered the jewels of an order that hung on his breast.

"The strongest man in Spain," La Herrera went on. "Some call him the Second King, but I like Quevedo's name for him—the Conqueror with the Cold Eyes."

As if she had caught a chill from the words, Soledad shivered and drew far back into the coach, holding the mantilla closely about her face.

II

THE NEW STAR

“**B**UT has she experience?” was the cautious question of Fernandez, manager and leading actor of the Corral de la Pacheca, when La Herrera, the next day, superbly informed him that a new star had arisen and his fortune was made.

“She is my niece,” La Herrera retorted. “That of itself will draw the crowd. When they see her they will stay. Having heard her, they will come again. What more do you want?”

“But has she—” Fernandez began once more.

La Herrera cut him short with a gesture of weary dignity. She preferred for the present to avoid confessing that Soledad had never seen a theater.

“She herself will answer you,” she said, and sent for Soledad.

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Fernandez waited in apologetic but unconvinced silence. La Herrera took up a book and turned the pages indifferently, with no misgiving as to the success of her audacious proposal. The door opened behind her. With a smile at Fernandez's change of expression, she turned to meet her niece. She made short work of preliminaries.

"Read him the 'Medea,' Soledad," she commanded, then corrected herself with a rather malicious suavity. "No—pardon me! Something Spanish. I forgot that Don Ramon has no Greek." She mentioned one of Quevedo's plays, a favorite of her own. She had known for a long time that Fernandez thought her too old for the heroine, but the play was too popular to put aside, and, in addition, his own part in it was especially good. She sat back now, watching the effect. She had taught Soledad all that she herself knew of the character, and the girl was putting her own heart into it. The manager, as La Herrera had expected, saw the advantage of talent plus youth and beauty. The actor pictured himself playing the love-scenes with this leading lady.

"Where did she get such training?" he whis-

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pered, enraptured. "I thought you said she came from the country?"

"I trained her, my friend," was the answer. "As for what you call experience, a Herrera does not cheapen herself by appearing before bumpkins. I have always had it in mind to rear this child to take my place."

Fernandez let this pass without question. Soledad had left him far from critical, seasoned as he was.

"More than ever," he said, "I bow to your genius." He struck abruptly into the practical. "We must make her first appearance a sensation—"

"I have thought of all that," La Herrera interrupted. "None of the modern comedies will do—all hackneyed, the best of them. We must go back to the classics to find something really original."

"With elements of well-established popularity, of course—" Fernandez interpolated, cautiously, shying at the word classic.

"I have thought of that also. What do you say to the 'Medea' of Euripides translated by Quevedo? Is that an ideal combination, or can you suggest a better?"

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Her tone dared him to try. Fernandez would have liked to ask whether Euripides wrote prose or verse, comedy or tragedy, but he was daunted by the lady's triumphant composure. Quevedo, at all events, he knew, was a more than safe speculation.

"Can we get him to do it?" he inquired, capitulating unconditionally.

"I can," returned La Herrera, with a delicate but unmistakable emphasis on the pronoun.

Indeed, she had lost no time in sending him a message, even before consulting Fernandez, and that afternoon he came. Soledad had known very few real men—her father, the priest, and a few peasants marked the boundaries of her experience—and her mental picture of Quevedo was distinctly of the idealistic school. His actual presence brought her no disillusion. He seemed neither young nor old, but of an ageless freshness like that of the gods—she had forgotten her aunt's diagnosis of the cause. He was very handsome, too, with the glamour of dreams in his pleasant hazel eyes. His gentle manner and quiet way of speech set off his caustic wit like dark enamel around a diamond. From the beginning Soledad was completely at

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her ease with him, and when she was ordered to read the "Medea" for Don Francisco, she outdid herself. The poet, delighted, promised the translation in two days.

"If it were a thing of my own," he added, whimsically, "you should have it to-morrow; but I am always a trifle clumsy with other men's ideas, whatever my enemies may say. But—" he turned loyally to the older woman—"where is the part in this for you?"

"I will play the nurse," she returned, not unconscious of magnanimity. "That will be my last appearance. There is room on the stage for only one La Herrera."

"Ugh!" Quevedo shook his head ruefully. "Time passes! And you and I were young together!"

"Never mind, Don Francisco," she rejoined, dryly. "Your profession demands neither youth nor beauty, so be comforted."

Quevedo made even better speed than he had promised, thanks to much enthusiasm and midnight oil. His pleasure in Soledad's talent and in herself grew with acquaintance, and his enthusiasm over her rendering of his lines was unbounded.

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"We must be friends, you and I," he said, warmly. "We serve the same altar."

"Her first appearance must be a sensation, you know!" La Herrera insisted, as he took his leave.

"Trust me for that," he said.

He knew the weight of his own opinion, and also the best means of advertising it, and he made, straight for the Church of St. Philip in the Calle Mayor—not with devotional intentions. His destination was the platform along the side of the church, where wits, rhymers, and gossip-mongers congregated to an extent that had earned this resort the name of the Liars' Walk. As usual, it was well filled, and a shout of welcome went up at Quevedo's approach, but he lost no time in singling out from the rest the man for whose interest he meant to bid. Juan de Tassis, Count of Villa Mediana, was a shining mark in more senses than one, as he stood at the top of the church steps throwing dice on the broad balustrade, his right hand against his left. At his feet a dwarf with patient, doggish eyes, and beard cut in pathetic imitation of his master's, also played an exclusive game with bits of bone. Villa Mediana's

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dice were tiny cubes of amethyst speckled with gold, and his dress was of a richness that would have meant vulgarity on any other man, but seemed only the natural expression of his fastidious haughtiness.

"Why do you play alone, Don Juan?" Quevedo asked.

Villa Mediana lifted his brows indolently. "Play is the only recreation that the methods of Olivares have left fit for a gentleman," he said. "He has tainted everything else with court intrigue—but at least a man may still gamble with clean hands."

"And we play alone," the dwarf struck in, "because we can find no stakes high enough to interest us. All or nothing is our motto, and—"

Villa Mediana gently touched the buffoon with his foot. "That will do, Panchito," he said. "Let Don Francisco speak—for unless his face is misleading us, he has some amusing news." He smiled gravely at Quevedo, while the dwarf sat expectant, his hand furtively laid upon his master's shoe with a touch that had adoration in it. "Olivares found the King a new mistress only last week—what other scandal could make you smile quite so broadly?"

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"The King," Quevedo proclaimed, solemnly, "is as chaste as Joseph. Olivares is the wisest and most disinterested of statesmen. Spain is in a state of unprecedented prosperity, peace, and virtue, and this morning an angel was found making himself quite at home in the Prado. It took four *alguacils* to convince him that it was not heaven, and at that he only believed them when he happened to catch sight of me—"

"Come to the key of the riddle," said Villa Mediana, above the laughter of the rest.

"Prudence, Don Juan. Prudence is my watchword, and it will be yours when you have my reason for not wishing to leave Madrid."

"An Olivares does not banish a Villa Mediana." Juan de Tassis's tone was the most exquisite refinement of insolence, and he ignored any other parties to the conversation as thoroughly as if he were alone with Quevedo. "If I am ever sent from the city it will be on a longer journey than Don Gaspar ever found it worth his while to give you. But what—or who—has made La Corte so attractive to you all at once?"

"Her name for the present is mine—my secret at least."

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“Are you thinking of making the former condition permanent?”

“God forbid! I am not so ambitious.”

Villa Mediana laughed at the prompt fervor of Quevedo's exclamation. The company made way for him as he came down the steps, and he took their deference unconcernedly, as no more than his due. The theater had, under royalty, no more influential patron, and after a little more fencing Quevedo told all his news, as he had intended to do from the first. His method of advertisement justified itself by its results. Before an hour had passed Madrid was buzzing with the advent of La Herrera the second, and Fernandez was overwhelmed with pleas for seats. When the manager was roused he was willing to gamble roundly. He announced now that the free list had been suspended, and this daring move stimulated the popular excitement to fever.

That evening, when La Herrera and Soledad left the theater with Quevedo after the first rehearsal, Villa Mediana's coach was waiting in the street, and the owner, with his grotesque shadow, stood magnificently expectant by the door.

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"Will La Herrera honor my coach by using it?" he said, with a bow that included both bearers of the name.

The older woman smiled ironically. She was indeed renewing her power, and something more—never before had Villa Mediana troubled to pay her attentions.

"You saw the rehearsal?" she asked.

He bowed again.

"The doorkeeper had orders to admit no one, even to the *aposentos*."

He sketched bribery with a gesture.

"I see—" La Herrera nodded, without displeasure. "Thank you for your courtesy. Good night, gentlemen."

"She is a genius, is she not?" said Quevedo, pleased at this recognition of Soledad's success.

Villa Mediana recalled his eyes from the vanishing coach, and looked at his companion with a wonder that merged into contempt.

"Is that all you see in her?" he asked.

"You think more of her beauty, doubtless?" Quevedo was scornful in his turn.

"She has something more than beauty," said Villa Mediana, thoughtfully. "Strange that you should not see it, and you a poet."

III

THE KING'S ANGELS

THE morning of Soledad's great day found his Most Sacred Majesty Philip the Fourth undergoing the painful process of being waked against his will. After a dogged but vain resistance, he admitted defeat by opening his eyes. Olivares saluted his royal master with due ceremony, and another day was officially begun.

Philip was feeling unusually ill in body and humor, and when he raised his head from the pillow the sensations that attended the effort were neither soothing nor inspiring. He lay back with some such smothered oath as would be likely to escape almost any youth under the circumstances, blinking fretfully up at his chamberlain, and what he saw irritated him. There was no trace of last night's revelry in that immovable face, no sympathetic dullness

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in the dark eyes. On the contrary, they amply justified Quevedo's nickname. They were steady and cold as diamonds—a quality that seemed inhuman at the moment to the jangling nerves of the boy. With a twitching shudder, Philip's look dropped till it encountered sheaves of papers lining Gaspar de Guzman's belt of Cordova leather. Philip flounced peevishly over on his side and burrowed into the pillow.

"These matters first, if it please your Majesty," said Olivares.

Philip rolled a backward eye, resentfully conscious that his Majesty's pleasure was at present by no means the foremost consideration, and saw a hand proffering more papers—a hand that looked as if it never had been and never could be unsteady.

"They can wait," he muttered.

"They cannot wait, sire. The council meets this morning, and your Majesty hardly needs to be told that the new taxes must be put in effect as quickly as possible. I have outlined the plan in fullest detail, but it cannot be presented without your Majesty's approval. Only a glance—"

"Why do you trouble me with it at all?"

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Philip interrupted, pettishly. "If I made any suggestions of my own, you would talk me out of them."

It was the querulous outburst of a moment, but it meant possibilities of danger. Olivares stiffened to swift watchfulness, like a startled snake. He continued silently to hold out the papers to Philip, who snatched them at last and accorded them a grudging glance. The close writing swam before his eyes, and his heavy lips quivered childishly.

"Without your Majesty's consent this cannot be presented." Olivares's tone was as inflexible and passionless as law. His patient endurance had the effect of a scathing reproach.

Philip had meant to give his importunate adviser a moment's discomfort, but he found that his intention seemed to react unpleasantly upon himself.

"We approve," he muttered.

Olivares bowed gravely and unfolded another paper; but Philip struck that aside.

"Do as you like, only let me alone!"

"Is this what I have done?"

Philip started, frightened by the agony in

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the deep, musical voice. He had not expected to be taken so seriously.

"I have tried to spare your Majesty the drudgery of ruling," Olivares went on — his tone was a masterpiece of yearning tenderness. "God knows that I have been glad to bear weariness that your Majesty might be free to enjoy your youth, but now the country is in such a state that it needs the hand of a king. The treasury is totally exhausted, ministers have grown venial and lax. If it is your trust in me that makes you shirk your responsibilities, I will at once leave the court, by your Majesty's permission or without it. Rather my ruin, rather my death, than that your Majesty should fail in your duty—" He stopped with a deep breath that had the effect of a sob, then added, with a superb simplicity, "I have presumed to love your Majesty too much."

He stood for a moment silent. Philip stared at him open-mouthed, appalled as if by an earthquake. When no answer came, Olivares bowed, returning to the carefully modulated commonplace.

"My keys of office shall be delivered to your Majesty—"

THE KING'S ANGELS

This jerked Philip out of bed, and he clung to Olivares as if he expected an immediate disappearance by supernatural means.

"No, no!" he cried, his pale eyes filling with the ready tears of weakness. "You cannot leave me, Don Gaspar! Spain has need of you, and I—oh, my friend!"

Gaspar de Guzman lifted the thin hand to his lips. As they touched it they relaxed in the shadow of a contemptuous smile.

"Now let me see the rest of the papers," Philip commanded, glowing with virtuous intentions. He ran them through with eager haste, guiltily aware that he understood but little of what he was reading. Finally he flung aside the last with a groan of relief. "Admirable—admirable! I myself could have devised no better help for that poor treasury. I take the full responsibility of all these measures. So much for duty—well?" His dull eyes lighted, and he smiled significantly.

The older man's hard mouth curved slowly in answer. "Tired of La Tavera already, sire?" he asked.

Philip shrugged his shoulders.

"Well—" Olivares took a moment for con-

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sideration, then suggested, "La Herrera plays for the last time this afternoon at the Corral de la Pacheca."

"That faded old woman!" Philip objected in frank disappointment.

"She is a creature of genius, at least, for she knows enough to leave her public before it leaves her. As for youth and beauty, her niece, who succeeds her, has both—and something more—" He paused effectively. "Your Majesty will not find it a waste of time," he finished.

The King's interest had revived as he listened. Now he surveyed Olivares with admiring wonder.

"There is not your like in all the world," he said at last. "You despise women, yet for my sake you can see them with the eyes of a lover."

"I am not even a grandee, sire," rejoined Olivares, lightly, "yet for your sake I can guess at the thoughts of a king."

Philip laughed somewhat absently. A moment later he laughed again, with relish, as at a jest of his own making.

"Not even a grandee—true! I had forgotten that. Yet you think like a king—the more reason for me to act like one. I will go to the council to-day."

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His Majesty's entrance among the assembled nobles was greeted by a stately and ceremonious sweeping off of plumed hats which were then returned with a flourish to their respective heads, for these were grandees of Spain who could stand covered in the presence of the King himself. The boy looked curiously from face to face. Olivares had chosen the ministers, and yet they had proved weak and venial. Philip's young heart swelled with a generous shame that this man who was spending his strength for the good of Spain should be able to find no more efficient help, and with a resolve that henceforth he himself would do all that became a king. He looked toward where the dark, bared head towered above the rest, and his eyes flashed.

"My lords," he said, clearly, and his bearing was not without nobility, "a king's first duty is justice. Therefore, before we proceed to affairs of state, Count of Olivares, Duke of San Lucar, be covered."

That afternoon the Corral de la Pacheca was decked as for a festival. Gay draperies fluttered from the houses that surrounded the large

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courtyard where the theater proper was located, and a new curtain hung from the tiled eaves over the stage. The men's benches on the ground level were crowded, the pit behind them was packed to suffocation. Crowning proof of popular interest, though the *cazuela's* capacity was sorely strained to accommodate all the ladies who had bought seats, the consequent crushing of hoops was endured without complaint. Behind the grated windows in the inclosing walls unseen grandeur rustled and flashed. Every *aposenito* was occupied, and it was an open secret that one of those private rooms held royalty, nominally incognito. And every seat paid for! The event was unparalleled in Fernandez's experience. He almost swooned with success, and he greeted La Herrera first and second on their arrival with an exaggerated homage that bordered on worship. They had dressed at home, and had only to throw off their cloaks at the theater. As the dark sheath fell away disclosing the splendor of the barbarian princess, La Herrera herself caught her breath with surprise at the girl's loveliness. It seemed as if the slender body flickered before her eyes, so strong a tumult

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of youth and hope pulsed in it visibly like flames.

The Nurse was the first upon the stage. La Herrera had chosen her part well, for the generous completeness of her abdication touched the Castilian sense of chivalry, and she had a reception the equal of any triumph of her palmyest days. The tense interest of the audience, however, was settled on the rising star, and when Soledad entered it seemed as if the very walls of the courtyard gasped with admiration.

She made her public more and more hers as the play went on—the tragedy that takes its poignancy not from the mere extinction of human lives, but from the death of a man's passion and the murder of a woman's faith. Quevedo closed his version with Medea's final doom upon her recreant lover:

For thee, behold, death draweth on
Evil and lonely like thine heart. The hands
Of thine old Argo, rotting where she stands,
Shall smite thine head in twain—and bitter be
To the last end thy memories of me.

Real tears had overflowed her eyes at Medea's farewell to her children—and Soledad was one

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of the rare women who are all the lovelier when they weep. Her cheeks were still wet as she stood a magnificent figure of triumphant vengeance, from which Jason fled in a terror that was only half simulated. Her lifted face was turned toward the window of an *aposento*, and she suddenly became conscious of a hand gripping the iron bars, and beyond, close to the grating, a dark face with glittering eyes. The taut string of her imagination snapped—Medea vanished, and Soledad was left panting and trembling before a storm of praise that seemed to rock the theater. Some one raised the cry of “La Soledad! La Soledad!” and the crowd took it up frantically. Coins and jewels rained upon the stage, even the women in the *cazuela* tore off their breast-knots of flowers and ribbons and flung them at the girl’s feet. A few moments she bore it; then, as they still delayed to draw the curtain, she took refuge behind the scenes in her aunt’s arms.

There it was, breathless and glowing, that Quevedo found her. She lifted her head gloriously to his praise, as if he gave her a crown.

“I played for you,” she said, simply.

Quevedo did not answer. He looked over

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her shoulder at some one behind her, and his face paled. Soledad turned, instinctively following his look, and confronted the stately presence of Olivares.

"His Majesty desires to speak with La Soledad," he said, bowing with grave courtesy.

Soledad's lips parted in a candid smile of delighted triumph. Then her hand went out impulsively to her aunt.

"His Majesty asks only for you, Soledad," said La Herrera in an odd, muffled tone.

That she should be so distinguished did not seem strange to the girl—probably one only received the royal recognition at the beginning of a career. With a swift, gracious movement she stooped and kissed the older woman, then, smiling to Quevedo as she passed him, she went out with Olivares.

Villa Mediana stood rigid in the doorway, his fine, haughty face a frozen mask of scorn and disgust. Involuntarily Quevedo sprang forward as if to follow them, sweat starting on his forehead. Villa Mediana stopped him.

"Are you mad?" he said, coldly.

"I am the one who was mad!" La Herrera lamented. "I thought the King's attention

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was well occupied and this was the safest time that could be chosen. Who would think that he could change so quickly?"

"Or that she could fall!" Villa Mediana said, bitterly.

"Poor child!" Quevedo groaned. "Poor child—"

"Spare your pity. Could you not see that she went smiling?" Villa Mediana's voice was fierce with pain.

La Herrera turned on him. "So that is where your shoe pinches! It would have been so different if she had gone wringing her hands, would it? What selfish beasts you men are! Smiling? Of course she went smiling—she understands only the honor paid to her art. All she knows of life she got from books—she has no more idea of what you call love than you have of what the word means to her—"

"And she will learn it—so!" The horror of it turned Villa Mediana cold; but La Herrera saw the matter from a different angle.

"Every woman has to learn that sometime; but from any other man I could have won her back to the stage—and would, too. This"—she wrung her hands desperately—"this is the

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end of her career. A little while at the palace and then—the convent, since the King's leavings are too good for any one but God. Holy Virgin, that I should have spent all this time and labor and hope on a mere abbess!"

Meanwhile Olivares had presented Soledad to the King and closed the door of the *aposenito*, himself on the outside. He crossed the corridor and stood at one of the farther windows looking out into the street. The dusk was deepening into darkness, and a thin, cold rain had just begun to drip monotonously from the overhanging eaves, but his spirits were high and his breath came quick and strong with triumph. Life was dealing very lavishly with him just now. The new taxes—one step toward the fulfilment of his great desire—his secure ascendancy over the King—the coveted grandeeship and his dukedom—and now, the keener for being unexpected, the pleasure that had filled him at the sight of Villa Mediana's tormented face. Olivares hated Juan de Tassis because the advantages that an Olivares must scheme and sacrifice to attain were the birth-right of a Villa Mediana, and his hate was all the deeper because Villa Mediana despised the

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ambitions that were Olivares's very breath—because he went his absorbed way in an exquisite world of his own, brushing aside the intrigues of the court like spider-webs. Well, it seemed there was one desire of this fine taster of life which had been balked by the man whom he dared to treat with open contempt. Olivares smiled with the comfortable conviction that at last he had found a joint in his enemy's armor.

He started at a touch on his arm and turned astonished to hear his name spoken by the King.

“Your Majesty—already!” he exclaimed.

“Oh, hush, hush!” Philip whispered, almost sobbing. “God forgive me for sacrilege! She is a saint, a saint! She did not understand—why, I tell you she is so pure she does not even know that she is pure! God be merciful to me a sinner—I had not thought there was anything like her in the world.”

“She did not understand?” repeated Olivares, amazed. “And your Majesty did not explain—”

“Explain? Would I throw down the rosary and trample on it? She goes as innocent as

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she came." He drew Olivares back to the *aposenito*, where Soledad waited in the lamp-light, serene, though a little weary.

"Don Gaspar will take you safely home," said Philip. "I am glad to see you two together. This morning he waked my conscience, now you have spoken to my soul. He is a happy man to whom God sends two guardian angels in one day."

IV

A RIVAL OF THE KING

ON warm evenings it was the custom to stroll along the dry bed of the Manzanares, outside the city walls. The air was cool and pleasant there. On its cliff above the valley the royal palace drew into itself all the blue of the darkening sky till it glowed like a great sapphire. So at least it seemed to Villa Mediana, who translated nature into terms of Soledad, and who had that day been choosing the blue jewels that were to be set in the ring with which he meant to marry her.

When Soledad emerged from the ordeal unscathed not only in body but in mind, Villa Mediana knew that here was his consort. He was too secure in his own pride to care what the world might say of his choice; here was a woman who stood, like himself, above common humanity. To him Soledad was marked by

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destiny Countess of Villa Mediana, and he would show no coarse haste in pushing his suit to a conclusion. Having declared his intentions in due form to La Herrera—much to her hidden consternation—his courtship of Soledad herself proceeded with scrupulous ceremony—so scrupulous that it left her wholly unconscious of his meaning. He assumed that La Herrera had acquainted her with his proposal, and mistook her ignorance for a dignity that matched his own.

It was with a passionate joy and pride in her that he now saw the effect of her approach upon the crowd—and yet, to any one but a lover like Villa Mediana, the spectacle had elements of the absurd. Everywhere except in her neighborhood coarse jests and bold compliments were liberally exchanged. That was a recognized part of the evening's diversion, one of the reasons for the promenade; but fashion was the fetish of the Madrilenos, and the King had set the fashion of regarding La Soledad as a prodigy half saint, half goddess. To Villa Mediana it seemed only a fit tribute to her. To another man, who somehow never lost sight of the tall, fair girl as he drifted idly among

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the crowd, it was both pitiful and funny to see the gay couples follow circumspectly in her wake till their curiosity was sated, and then retreat to a less oppressive atmosphere.

Quevedo had once been something more than a walking brain. Now, as he saw the look with which Villa Mediana bent over Soledad's hand, he felt a familiar aching glow where he knew there could be only ashes long since cold. Naturally enough, he told himself he might easily have had a daughter like that. He had often heard of the jealousy of a father—the feeling of it was curiously like the other kind, it seemed. He was pleased to find how satisfactorily that explained thoughts and feelings that had disquieted him somewhat of late. He liked Villa Mediana, paternally, for his formality. He would make the child a good husband—again there came a twinge of that jealousy which was perfectly excusable in a father. If only that pretty head were not already too much befogged with high-flown notions about art! He knew La Herrera, and what her teachings would be—well, youth was youth, and one kiss would outweigh many words. With the thought came a whimsical

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wonder how long it would take Villa Mediana's lofty adoration to descend to trading in such plebeian coin.

La Herrera's face had taken on a set and rigid amiability that spelled displeasure for any one who knew her alphabet and took the trouble to read. Catching Quevedo's eye, she openly beckoned him to join them. With a mingling of gladness and reluctance he obeyed, and, after a few moments of general civilities, La Herrera suggested that they resume their walk, taking the arm of Villa Mediana as graciously as if he had offered it. As they moved off Quevedo saw her well-disciplined countenance settling into its motherly expression, and thought that Villa Mediana had met a gambler as reckless as himself, and with the advantage of entire lack of scruple. Quevedo had learned at some cost, in other days, how pitiless Ana de Herrera could be when her art and her ambition were in question.

With a quick, short nod of resolution he turned to Soledad, smiling. Then the smile faded, for his keen eyes, when they looked full at her, saw instantly that her delicate color was artificial. A very real flush flamed up to

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the black lace of her mantilla—she still wore mourning for her father.

“My aunt would have it—she said I was too pale,” Soledad stammered.

“And it looks very pretty,” he said, tenderly, drawing her arm through his with a shy, comforting pressure. “But your own is prettier—the color you brought from Las Espadas. You must get that back. I think you have been working too hard.”

“Have I done well?” she asked, as if nothing else mattered.

“Do you need to ask me, my child?” he returned. “All Madrid has been saying yes to that, and not only all Madrid, but—” His look rested significantly on the gold crown set with diamonds that clasped the string of pearls about her throat. The Queen’s own hand had fastened that clasp for the first time.

“I thought I must have disappointed you when you did not come to see me,” Soledad said.

“Child!” Quevedo patted her hand reassuringly, thinking how easily a man might lose his head and make a fool of himself. “You have done wonders.” He went on rather

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hoarsely: "I have seen you every time you played, and with the rest have applauded the skin from my palms. If I did not come to tell you what I thought, it was only because I did not know that you would care."

"Not care? I used to read your plays there in Las Espadas. You were the one in Madrid that I most hoped to see—and then you said that we must be friends, for we serve the same altar." Her head was high, and her color strong enough now; but she looked him frankly in the eyes.

He cleared his throat. "And friends we are, my dear child. Whenever I can serve you, call on me as you would on your"—he was about to say father when the black dress reminded him of her loss—"elder brother."

The sincerity of his feelings was not to be doubted. Soledad accepted his explanation without question, so happy that tears came to her eyes and she dared not look at him for fear of seeming childish. In the moment's pause Quevedo heard La Herrera murmur in tones of perfectly modulated pathos, "Of course, my only thought is for her happiness." Quick resentment drew his brows together. Soledad

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should have a warmer sort of happiness than her aunt intended to allow her, if he could help her to it.

“But as for serving the same altar,” he went on, pleasantly, “that is only for a time. There are better things in store for you, please God. I hope that before long I may see you happily married.”

Soledad looked at him, startled. “Married?”

“I admire your aunt,” said Quevedo, dryly; “but I would be very sorry to see you follow her example in all respects. Life should be more than a stage, for you. When love comes to you, little sister, follow it even over stones and deserts and through deep waters. Art is good, but love is better—I have known both, so you may take my word for it. Your aunt never knew but the one. I am glad to see you a fine actress; but I shall not be content till I see you the happy wife of a strong man who loves you. That is what I would wish for my own daughter.”

The color had gone from Soledad’s face, and under the rouge she was as pale as her pearls. “And if—if love never comes to me?” she said.

“It will. God does not waste women like you.”

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He stopped abruptly, conscious that his voice trembled a little, and they walked on in silence. Soledad was not a skilled analyst of her own feelings. She only knew that although Quevedo had given her the friendship she had so longed for, and had even called her little sister, the evening had grown cold and she was deadly tired.

La Herrera, too thrifty to let the sight of her treasure grow commonplace, had turned from the crowd in the river-bed toward the green hedges of the park below the palace. From one of the shadowy alleys an unexpected horseman dashed full upon the little group. La Herrera screamed and took refuge behind her niece, and the rider reined back his great stallion on its haunches, but not before Villa Mediana had leaped to its head and caught the bridle.

"Be more careful!" he commanded, as one who has the right to protect. "Do you not see Doña Soledad?"

Olivares swung himself from the saddle, flinging the reins to a groom who followed him, and faced Villa Mediana for an instant, his eyes dilated and even darker than usual. Then he spoke, too low for the others to hear.

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"I see—everything. And I say to you, be more careful. A wise man does not make himself the rival of a king."

He came swiftly forward to Soledad, sweeping off his great plumed hat, and raised her hand to his lips.

"Forgive me. I should not have been riding so fast in the twilight, but my mind was on state matters, and"—he made a motion of humorous helplessness—"you must know how one forgets the world! Or do you only know how to make others forget it?"

His manner was not of perfunctory compliment, but of comradeship, with a subtle undertone of intimacy. It warmed Soledad's chilled, sore heart with a pulse of pride that the Second King should greet her like this. He spoke a few courteous words to the rest of the company—his manner cooling with a suggestion of condescension as he turned from her—and took his leave. The horse had been fretting and rearing in the groom's uneasy care, but quieted instantly at the touch of that heavy hand which could inflict so much pain with so little effort. For a moment rider and mount appeared as one gigantic, half-human shape in the dusk,

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then the green shadows closed about the centaur.

Quevedo immediately engaged La Herrera's attention and held it with brilliant dexterity until they reached her house, Soledad walking before them with Villa Mediana. When Quevedo reached his own home he was—alas for unselfish devotion!—wholly out of temper. He had honestly meant that he would not be content till he saw Soledad the wife of Villa Mediana—and yet the memory of the innumerable silent tendernesses with which Villa Mediana had watched over her on the walk annoyed him like a swarm of stinging flies. As pitiless a vivisector of himself as of others, he fully admitted his own inconsistency.

“*Mea culpa!*” he sighed, with a shake of the head. “I am no better than poor Ana at heart, after all. Dogs in the manger, both of us.”

Forgetting his professions of prudence, he sat down at his table and plunged into work, from force of habit expending his ill humor in pungent verse—so successfully that, a week later, when he had expected to be sitting among the spectators at the great cane tournament, he was

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on his way to an indefinitely long outing at his country house, by order of the King.

The day set for the festivities proved in every way propitious, and the audience was in high spirits. The air was dazzling with sunshine and heavy with rich scents, for the pretty Queen, all animation, set the example to the gay crowd by pelting her neighbors with gilded egg-shells filled with perfume, an amusement in which even his Majesty condescended to join.

The Queen's eyes were brighter and her laughter louder than usual, for she was proudly hiding a sore and angry heart. Just before the royal party had started for the celebration she had overheard a snatch of talk between the King and Olivares, and had impulsively thrust herself into the conversation.

"But, Don Gaspar!" she cried. "Of course there is difficulty in enforcing your new taxes! You are behaving as if Aragon and Catalonia were your right and left shoes. French as I am, I know they have rights of their own, rights they have cherished for centuries. I was taught all this before I was sent to be Queen of Spain. Are you ignorant, or do you think yourself

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strong enough to impose your will on all the world because you are called the Conqueror here in Madrid?"

She brought out the last words with an effort, daunted in spite of herself by the cold malignity in the minister's eyes.

"Your Majesty's personal dislike of me carries you too far," he returned, quietly. "There is no question of my humble self in this matter. The King is Spain—surely you will hardly question his strength to govern his subjects?" He paused, then added, with a controlled venom that drove the words home: "Remember, your Majesty, politics are for men. A woman's share in them is to bring men into the world—if she does that it is enough."

The sonless Queen stood for a moment silent, the color draining from her face. "I will remember, your Excellency," she said, evenly. Then she turned away, and a moment later they heard her merry laughter among her women. Olivares's mouth set in scornful triumph. That was the way to deal with a rebellious woman—harsh, abrupt mastery. Her manner at the tourney apparently proved him right, for she seemed to have forgotten rancor in

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pleasure, and had nothing but smiles for all the world. She sparkled with delight as the cavaliers rode into the arena with their followers and saluted the royal party with a display of their finest horsemanship. Villa Mediana and his troop were the last to enter. They were magnificent in sapphire velvet, and their device was the silver coin called the "royal," surmounted by the motto, "My love is . . ."

A rustle of delight ran around the benches as the crowd caught the daring double meaning. It was a piece of audacity worthy of Juan de Tassis to hide so dangerous an avowal in the inveterate gambler's confession of his passion for coin. The Queen, by no means displeased by what she thought a public and flamboyant compliment, flung him an egg-shell, and a roar of applause went up as he caught it on his lance. She turned to Philip with a coquettish laugh. She was not sorry for the chance to give him a moment's discomfort in return for his many infidelities, and for the humiliation he had just allowed her to bear.

"Villa Mediana aims well!" she exclaimed.

"He aims too high," retorted Philip, coldly, his heavy face settling into the haughty mask

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with which he had already learned to hide his emotions in public.

He was still brooding sullenly when Olivares attended him to his room that night. The chamberlain was about to draw the curtains of the great carved structure, more like a pavilion than a bed, when he hesitated, the candle lifted in his hand, intently studying the sensual, unhealthy face on the pillow, its eyes screwed tight shut like those of a fretful child. If, as he suspected, Philip's reverence for Soledad had never been anything more than a hair-shirt, assumed in a moment of abasement, then this was such an opportunity as does not come twice in a lifetime.

"Your Majesty." The words came with a perfectly calculated impulsiveness that even La Herrera could not have equaled. "I cannot bear to leave your mind troubled when a word might ease it. Forgive my love for guessing what your perfect dignity hides from the world—"

Philip's eyes had snapped open. He raised himself on his elbow. "What do you mean?" he stammered, taken aback.

"What did *he* mean?" said Olivares, smiling.

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"Not what you think, sire. Villa Mediana's presumption was not directed to her Majesty."

Philip's face showed first relief, then perplexity, with a vague background of troubled suspicion. "Whom does he love, then?" he asked, slowly, as if against his will.

"La Soledad, your Majesty."

"La Soledad!" Philip almost screamed the name.

"He evidently misunderstands the holy quality of your Majesty's regard for her," Olivares went on, now sure of his ground, "and dares to consider himself your rival."

"But I thought she was pure as the angels—" Philip's fingers were tearing unconsciously at the embroidered sheet, and there was the soreness of disillusion as well as of jealousy in his outcry.

"She is, as yet." Olivares shrugged his shoulders with a slight laugh. "Villa Mediana is a moralist, you know—the kind who buys his wedding-ring before he kisses. Your Majesty has no heavier offense to pardon than the vanity of a fool who likes to boast of a prize that after all"—he paused, then finished deliberately—"you never really tried to win."

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"He has not won it yet," Philip muttered.

"Not yet," assented Olivares. He closed the curtains and blew out the candle, and his deep voice came musically from the darkness as Philip sank back on the pillow tense and shaking. "God send your Majesty pleasant dreams."

V

HOW LOVE CAME

THE next day the King announced his decision to spend June at Aranjuez. The proposed erection of a temporary playhouse in the gardens would make La Soledad's presence there a necessity. Philip had been for an immediate adjustment of affairs to the desired basis, but Olivares advised delay as the essential price of success.

"Not yet, your Majesty, not yet. She is still a statue. Let Don Pygmalion de Tassis mellow the ivory with his prayers a little longer. Then, when she is ready to step from her pedestal, let it be—into your arms."

"Into no others." The death which a king can deal with a word stood threatening in the pale eyes.

"And hard as it will be, sire, you will recognize the wisdom of avoiding personal attentions

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which would make her Majesty suspicious. That will simplify matters in the end."

Philip frowned. He knew only too well the possibilities of the pleached alleys and indiscreetly discreet summer-houses of Aranjuez. "I suppose you are right," he admitted. "Diplomacy is your business. But—"

"I will make it my own affair to see that Villa Mediana does not go too far."

Philip embraced the older man boyishly, as he often did when they were alone. "You never fail me!"

Olivares looked down at him with a slow drawing-back of the lips that was not quite a smile. "As you say, diplomacy is my business," he said, "but I am not infallible. Be sure of this, however, I will do my best. Whatever happens, never doubt me, sire."

June at Aranjuez passed like a dream for Soledad—long sunny days in gardens beautiful as those of Armida, among gracious people who treated her as if she were a princess. She knew nothing of the ephemeral quality of such homage—to her it all rang true, marvelous as it might be. This was the reward of art—and yet she was to believe that love was better!

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There were many questions in her heart these days that she would have liked to ask Quevedo. If he had been there to hear and to answer, this story would have had a different ending.

The day before the return to Madrid she was sitting in a favorite retreat of hers with a book in her hand—a parting gift of Quevedo's on his enforced departure. She was not reading, nor even thinking connectedly, only floating among vague, disturbing dreams. Their first day at Aranjuez Olivares had pointed out this little rose-garden to La Herrera and Soledad, when he had met them walking among the green hedges, and had strolled beside them for a while. Such meetings had become matters of habit, and now Soledad found the day meager that did not bring some moment when she listened to the great man's words as a priestess listens to the oracle. To her, as to the King, Olivares had come to represent the very soul of Spain. Beside this man of power Villa Mediana seemed a futile dilettante, Quevedo himself a gentle, ineffective dreamer. La Herrera was shrewd enough to guess from the Count-Duke's assiduity that the King had not yet given up the chase; but now that it had become a question

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of patience and craft, she felt confident of her ability to handle him as well as Villa Mediana. As she watched the simplicity with which Soledad accepted the adulation of the court, she was assured that the girl had found her balance. When one has learned how pleasant it is to take, who but a fool could be persuaded to give one atom more than is absolutely necessary? And Soledad, young as she was, was evidently no fool, from her aunt's standpoint.

The late afternoon air was still warmly golden, but the shadow of the impenetrable cypress hedges already lay on the rose-garden. Soledad shivered a little and closed her book. Then she saw Olivares standing near her at the entrance of the green-walled circle, his eyes fixed upon her with a deep intentness as if he had been watching her for some time. She stood up quickly in embarrassment, her book sliding to the grass. He came forward and lifted her hand for the customary salutation. Although his lips barely touched it, there was a quality in the touch that burned. She raised her eyes to his with a sudden recollection of his face in the torchlight, when she had shrunk afraid of some strange peril that seemed to threaten

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her in his look. What heroic patriotism and self-sacrifice she had learned to see in those eyes since then! Cold? No—life-giving as the sun. It seemed a whole lifetime lay between that moment and this. Neither spoke. Then he let fall her hand abruptly and, turning from her, swept a shower of pink petals to the ground with a sharp movement.

"There goes June," he said. "Neither a rose nor a dream can last for ever."

"Your dreams will."

"You mean that I will dream till I die?"

"I mean that such thoughts as you have told me can never die—that Spain, the Spain you hope for, shall lead the world some day, because your life has made that possible."

"Some day!" His sigh ended in a laugh. "That is not enough. If I may not see the reality, what is the use of having dreamed?"

"You have the dream itself."

"Not enough," he repeated. "A dream is not enough, Soledad."

He had never before called her simply by her name. Now he did not seem to realize that he had done so. He still stood turned a little from her, his eyes on the rose-bush from which

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he was pulling flower after flower and scattering the crushed petals on the grass.

"Yours will come true," she assured him, steadily, though her breath quickened. "They must. God does not waste men like you." A sudden echo of the words rose in her memory, and with it a flush swept up to her forehead as it had that night. She was glad that he did not look at her.

"What faith you have in me, Soledad—what faith! You are the only one in the world who believes in me like that."

His voice made her tremble as the deep notes of a cello had done when she was a child. It was a moment before she could be sure enough of her voice to say:

"The King!"

"He believes in me, yes—after his fashion. But what is belief worth without understanding? Soledad—if you knew!" He broke off with the laugh of one weary to death who cannot help seeing the grim humor of what is killing him. "Can you imagine what it means to be absolutely alone? Alone?"

"Alone?" she repeated, very low. "But—you have—"

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He looked at her as she hesitated, and his smile was more bitterly tired than his laugh had been.

“What have I?” he said, quietly. “A wife, do you mean?” There was a silence before he went on. “In my world people marry for position, advancement, power, money—for an heir, above all—but marriage has nothing to do with love. Love, in my world, is a high and terrible god, strong enough to be his own priest, standing above the laws of man. My marriage was a bargain. The Countess has had from me all that she expected or desired, and I—what right have I to complain because my ambitions have outgrown her understanding? It would be as unjust as to blame her because we have no son. My daughter is very dear to me, but—lately—I have dreamed what it might be to hold in my arms a child whose mother I loved—oh God!” He checked himself sharply, his eyes closed for a moment, his lips compressed as if he held back a groan of physical pain. When he spoke again his manner was almost coldly indifferent. “Why should I tell you all this? You have your own life, and my only share in it is that you believe in my dreams for Spain.”

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"And in you," she said.

"You believe in me," he repeated, slowly. "You believe in me—only that. And I love you." The words were not passionate, but unutterably hopeless, and yet instinctively she drew back. He raised his hand in reproachful protest. "No, no—that hurts. Why are you afraid? I know that you do not love me—I cannot even wish you did, for the woman who loves me must tread a road that is too hard for you. You were made to walk joyously in the sunshine with a man like Villa Mediana—a man who knows how to please women, a man to whom your love would be the only thing in life. You were not made for sacrifice—only for tenderness. I ask nothing—I had not meant even to let you know—yet it is better there should be only truth between you and me. Do not be too sorry for me. To love you would be a greater happiness than most men know, even if you gave me nothing—and you have given me your faith. Never doubt me, Soledad."

He stooped for the book, smoothed its crumpled pages, and gave it back to her. As she took it, his hands caught hers and he stooped toward her, pleading in his eyes. She felt his lips on

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her forehead. Then, with no violence, but irresistible as fate, he lifted her face to his.

“One kiss—for a lifetime. Did I ask too much, Soledad? That will be with me till I die,” he said. “Go now, child—go back to the sunlight. It is too cold for you here.”

Still languid and dazed from that supreme moment, she turned with mechanical obedience; but as she reached the opening in the hedge she looked back. He was sitting on a marble garden seat under a trellis of flaming crimson roses, his face hidden against his arm. As she watched, one long sigh lifted his bent shoulders.

All Soledad's life had been lived among ideas and names, not among facts. She understood nothing now but his need of her. To her the throbbing tumult that shook her was the voice of God commanding her to rise to her lover's greatness, to take the high, sacrificial road of love. With neither haste nor hesitation she crossed the grass to where he sat. He looked up as her dress rustled beside him. She could not speak, but she bent to him, holding out her arms. She could not see that it was the face of a conqueror, not of a lover, that he hid on her bosom.

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While the stars came out and the dew filled the twilight with subtly intoxicating perfume of unseen flowers, Villa Mediana, not being gifted with second sight, fretted for the hour of the final performance at the garden theater. Master of the revels in Quevedo's absence, he had carefully set that evening's stage for a decisive act in his own drama. He had grown more like common humanity than he fully realized in these days when he had come to the humiliating conviction that La Herrera was playing with him, and that he meant nothing as yet to Soledad. He had resolved to bring himself strongly to her notice, and under circumstances that should insure him a favorable hearing.

He had spared no pains to make the evening's entertainment a memorable success. Soledad had ~~no~~ part in the comedy that began the programme. By what was generally conceded to be a particularly clever touch, she was to appear alone as the goddess of the gardens, and speak a sort of epilogue, an elaborate farewell to the royal pair whose departure would seal Aranjuez, even in midsummer, in a wintry sleep not to be broken till their return should wake the spring again.

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Clustered on the lawn before the little theater the court rustled and whispered, flashed its jewels and shook out its essences. The comedy had passed off brilliantly, and now all waited for Soledad, her fellow-players with the rest. They had come forward among the aristocratic spectators to enjoy her, to applaud her. Let who feels able to judge pronounce what this testifies of her—no woman was ever jealous of Soledad.

When she appeared at last the whole audience hailed her before she had spoken a word, for her loveliness was more eloquent than speech. She seemed indeed a goddess, an elemental creature astray in their artificial world, or a young mystic musing on some revelation of spiritual ecstasy, flawed like an opal with glorious fires of pain. She spoke like one not wholly wakened from some overpowering dream, and the rapt sweetness of her measured voice turned the trite bombastic phrases to real poetry. Philip closed his eyes for a moment with a sigh. Never had she seemed to him so utterly desirable, never so hopelessly out of reach.

She finished her speech and made her exit. Hardly had the draperies at the back of the

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stage fallen into place behind her when a blaze shot up from a corner and, before the audience had time to cry out, the whole structure of silk and canvas, flimsy as a mountebank's booth, was a roaring blaze. Philip started in terror to his feet, but the Queen clung to his arm. He flung a frantic look behind him—Olivares had disappeared. The King's eyes filled with tears of relief and gratitude. Let the broad banner of flame stream up against the sky, Soledad would be safe, he knew.

It was not Olivares, however, but Villa Mediana who burst into the burning dressing-room. Just in time, for in her first attempt at escape from this terrible presence that had so suddenly hemmed her in the flame had caught her delicate draperies. He flung his heavy cloak about her, stifling the fire, and carried her out into the shrubbery behind the theater.

He had sheltered her from further harm, but his own hair and clothes were scorched, and they both were trembling as they passed into the cool shadow. This was the moment for which he had prepared; but as he set her down she clung to him—simply because she could not stand alone. It was too much for him—like

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wine to a starving man. Forgetting wholly the effect he had meant to make, he held her breathlessly close with broken, inarticulate murmurs of passionate tenderness too deep to be measured in words. Bewildered and half conscious as she was, this strange, fierce embrace seemed to her as terrible and almost as impersonal as the fire. She fought in desperate silence to free herself, as one fights the incubus in a bad dream—then all at once she saw Olivares in a gap of the shrubbery, the glare of the fire clear upon his face.

“Don Gaspar!” she called.

Villa Mediana started, and his hold relaxed. She slipped from him, leaving the cloak in his arms, and ran to Olivares with outstretched hands.

A moment later, with admirably dignified solicitude, the Count-Duke consigned her to the care of La Herrera, who appeared in a state of dramatic distraction. Then he stood waiting as Villa Mediana came forward slowly into the red light of the ruins. They were embers now—the brief blaze was over.

The two men stood measuring each other in silence, Villa Mediana’s look curious and in-

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tent, as if he were seeing Olivares for the first time.

“I need only remind Don Juan,” said Olivares, with deadly suavity, “that it is dangerous to be the rival of a king.”

Villa Mediana threw back his head with a savage laugh. “We are brave men, you and I,” he said, and turning on his heel he swung away down a green alley.

From the shelter of the hedge Panchito crept out and scuttled after him.

VI

“IT IS DONE”

NEVER had an exile seemed so tedious to Quevedo, never a recall so welcome as that which reached him in August. He hastened back to Madrid at a lover's pace, for these two months and more of loneliness had cured him of the fatherly fallacy. He made straight for La Herrera's house and asked for Soledad.

“Soledad?” La Herrera stared at him. “Soledad? Do you mean you have not heard?”

Quevedo's heart sank. “Is she married? Already?” he asked, wishing that he had been a little less eloquent on Villa Mediana's behalf.

La Herrera laughed disagreeably. “Well, we may hope so—the jeweler who made the wedding-ring has told all he knows and more, no doubt. But if you can tell where she is, you know something that the King and Olivares

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have been searching the city to discover ever since the court came back from Aranjuez.”

“She has gone? Disappeared? But where—”

“Ask Villa Mediana. Oh, how that man has deceived me! He burned down the theater so that he could play the hero, they say. Well, I wish him joy of his luck—while it lasts.”

“But why does he hide her?”

“You are as much of a fool as I,” snapped the exasperated lady, “and I was fool enough—have you forgotten how I warned him that if he won her I could win her back—long ago, that first night at the theater? Of course he keeps her out of my reach. He has smuggled her well out of Madrid, take my word for it, and is biding his time to join her. And to think, if I had only had the wit to hold my tongue, he would have gone about it all quite openly, and she would have been safe in my house again, a widow, by this time.”

“A widow?” Quevedo repeated, frowning.

“The King is wild with jealousy,” said La Herrera, with grim relish. “Villa Mediana still is followed whenever he goes out. One of these days his Majesty will get tired of trying to trace her, and then—Don Juan will meet with

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an accident and Soledad will wait for him to no purpose. Then, when he is out of the way, she will come back to me. I can keep her from the King's notice till he has found another fancy—it is only the thought that another man has her that makes him so mad about her now.”

“I believe you wish Villa Mediana dead,” he said, shaking his head. “You are a terrible woman.”

“And you are a sentimentalist who can see no point of view but your own. Men always stand by one another. Go away before you annoy me.”

When he left her house Quevedo stood hesitating, looking toward the Puerta del Sol, then with a shrug he turned toward his own lodging. Villa Mediana must know his danger—let him play his own game and take his chances as he himself would have done. He smiled bitterly as he found his steps on the pavement marching to the tune of La Herrera's words—“And then, when he is out of the way, she will come back to me”—and thought how much better he could understand her point of view than she realized. But if Soledad loved Villa Mediana — well, was not the tempest in his own

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heart witness that one can love with all the strength of mind and body not once only? “And then, when he is out of the way, she will—” Quevedo swore at himself under his breath and changed the rhythm of his walk.

His servant gave him a package as he went in, a book wrapped in silk. “This was left for you, master,” he said, “and they put it away, knowing that you always came back soon.”

In his own room Quevedo opened it with faint curiosity, then stood very quiet staring at the volume, for it was his parting gift to Soledad. To make sure he opened at the title-page, where he had written her name. Something more had been written there. He had never seen her handwriting, but he knew it. First came three lines from his “Medea”:

Surely this doth bind,
Through all ill days, the hurts of humankind—
When man and woman in one music move.

Then, with a free dash of the pen, as if a sudden wave of joy had lifted her: “Brother, I have what you wished for me. Be content.”

Presently Quevedo closed the book with an odd gentleness and laid it before his crucifix. Then he went straight to Villa Mediana’s palace.

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He had not looked his age when he had tried to fancy himself Soledad's father, but now he did.

The Count was not at home, but Panchito was squatting on the steps, staring expectantly down the street like a dog who has been left behind.

"He never takes me with him now because people ask me questions," he told Quevedo. "I would only tell them lies if I knew—as it is, I dare not say anything for fear it might be the truth. I think I know what the truth is, but you never can tell."

"Your master is in danger of his life, do you realize that?" Quevedo asked, sharply.

"I am only paid to act like a fool, not to be one," the dwarf retorted. "Of course I know it. He wears a mail-shirt that will turn any dagger, but there are other ways. I wish he would take me with him—nobody knows how strong I am."

"How is he, Panchito? He must be very happy."

"Why, if he must be, he is." The dwarf shrugged his shoulders. "I told you I do not even know enough to lie about. He has locked

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up his face in a mask like Olivares—I liked it better as it was. Ah, there he is now.”

Villa Mediana’s sumptuous coach had turned the corner of the Calle Mayor. Quevedo scanned him quickly as he alighted. The dwarf had spoken truly—his face was as expressionless as the Count-Duke’s, and the change was not an improvement. Quevedo thought he looked drawn and hard, and that his sunken, shadowed eyes were those of a sick man. He welcomed his visitor with formal courtesy, but Quevedo plunged past the conventions.

“Don Juan,” he said, “forgive me if I intrude in a delicate matter. You are a brave man, so brave that you can afford to run away from danger. I beg you to leave Madrid as quickly and as secretly as possible.” Villa Mediana shook his head, but Quevedo insisted. “Any help that I can give I will give gladly. Count on me to the uttermost. For her sake, you must go.” Then, as Villa Mediana’s face still remained inscrutable, Quevedo’s voice dropped to a cold whisper. “If you have wronged her—if I thought that your silence meant that—”

Villa Mediana held out his hand with a

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strange smile. "You may take it, Don Francisco," he said, simply. "I have done her no wrong, and my silence has been for her sake. In staying here, God knows I think more of her safety than my own. I"—he hesitated—"I can tell you nothing as yet, but to-night I hope to settle all uncertainties. If you will meet me here later I will answer any questions that you may wish to ask me about—her. Shall we say four o'clock? Just before dawn?"

Villa Mediana's quiet formality of manner made the queer choice of an hour seem all the more grotesque. Quevedo assented, and took his leave, wondering if it could all be a dream.

The Calle Mayor started grandly from the Puerta del Sol, but the farther it went the narrower it grew, till it lost itself at last in a delta of obscure alleys choked with little one-story houses—curious, secretive places, with Oriental-looking lattices and gratings at the windows, and spiked walls concealing the gardens even from the neighbors. This quarter had been gay enough and too gay at the beginning of Philip's reign. His sudden access of piety had put out the colored lamps and hushed the guitars, but silently, one by one, the tenants

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or others like them had crept back. All was now conducted with the greatest discretion. There was no noisy revelry; but as the dusk deepened house after house opened expectant eyes of warm light, and doors were left ajar.

In one of these alleys Villa Mediana's coach waited before a gaming-house—one of the most fashionable resorts of the kind, in spite of its dubious location. Farther along the street, in the shadow of a projecting buttress, a man with a crossbow on his shoulder stood watching the door where Villa Mediana had gone in. The coach had been there for a long time; but that was not strange, considering the Count's well-known taste for play. There were two or three houses connected by openings in the side walls, and the establishment had rooms for cards, rooms for dice, and other chambers. A man could pass from one room and one diversion to another with only the most casual notice from the intent gamblers. In an empty corridor Villa Mediana had swung himself through a window into a neighboring alley. Now he stood there, ambushed in his turn like the crossbowman, his back against the solid masonry of a wall, his eyes intent on the house opposite.

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Here and there lights kindled and were extinguished—these houses rarely slept soundly through a long, peaceful night. In the house that he was watching one window glowed, but at last the light faded as if a lamp were being carried from the room. He moved noiselessly across the street and stood flattened against the wall of the garden, beside the hinge of the heavy door. Presently there were steps on the garden walk, and a key was put in the lock. The door was not opened at once. There was a soft, indistinguishable murmur, then a woman's voice spoke clearly, insistently—a voice he knew.

“But you must go now—it is near morning.” Something seemed to stop her suddenly, then she spoke again. “Remember, you cannot leave me alone—you are always with me, now. Always—” A rapture came into her tone. “My lord—if it should be a son!”

Villa Mediana's face in the moonlight was rigid and ghastly, as that of one who has died horribly, but life came back to it as he heard the man's answer.

“I swear I will make him my heir before all the world.”

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The listener by the door smiled. There was another pause, then the door swung cautiously outward. A tall man wrapped in a cloak looked up and down the street. It shone white and empty, and he came out upon it, closing the door behind him. That action brought him face to face with Villa Mediana.

Quietly, without haste, Olivares locked the garden door and took out the key with a cold alertness for any movement of the other man. “Go in quickly, beloved,” he called, softly. “The air is chill—and no harm must come to you.”

They heard her steps recede and the sound of a closing door.

As by common consent, the two men went out of earshot of the house before a word was spoken.

“I must congratulate your Excellency, it seems,” Villa Mediana said. The harsh effort of his voice made Olivares’s heart bound exultantly, mortal as he knew the danger to be. It had been a keen pleasure to think that Villa Mediana’s chosen wife was the willing mistress of the man he had dared openly to despise; but that Villa Mediana himself should see her

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so was a satisfaction worth whatever it might cost.

"I went to the gaming-house, where your spy is no doubt still watching my coach," Villa Mediana went on, "but their stakes were not high enough to interest me. I had another game in mind—and I came here, thinking it might be possible for me to try a cast of the dice with your Excellency. I meant to stake this"—the sapphire circle flashed in the moonlight as he held it out, his hand steady as iron—"against the key in your hand. But I find"—he drew a sharp breath and moistened his lips, then went on evenly—"that neither the one nor the other is any use to me. A Villa Mediana does not father the leavings of an Olivares." With a swift movement he caught Olivares's left hand, thrust the ring on the little finger, and threw the hand from him contemptuously. "Thief," he said, deliberately, "thief and coward—take the ring, too."

Olivares's hands clenched, but he still was silent.

"Need I do more?" asked Villa Mediana, softly. "Perhaps your Excellency does not

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consider the truth an insult. In that case—” He lifted his hand.

“No,” said Olivares. “It is enough.”

“Good.” Villa Mediana bowed ceremoniously. “I will wait at my house for a message from you.” His haggard eyes stared ominously at the other. “One thing I still can do for her,” he said. “You shall not live to break your oath.”

When Quevedo kept his appointment he found Panchito squatting on the steps as before.

“He went alone, then?”

“Always alone, night and day. If only he would trust me!” he cackled, drearily, in the professional manner. “He might rely on my honor as a gentleman if not on the lady’s taste. Ah, poor hot heart! It will be the death of him some day.”

“Well,” returned Quevedo, with a half-hearted attempt to treat the matter lightly, “Cupid has no eyes, and I suppose that is why a man can go about as full of his arrows as Saint Sebastian and die of gout in the end. A blind archer does not hit the vitals. Ugh!” He looked about him with a shiver. The

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moon was setting, and the Puerta del Sol was bleak and cheerless in the dubious light. "Ghastly hour! The world is like one great burial-vault. I'll wait inside."

He went into one of the high-ceiled reception-rooms, where a fire was laid. The dwarf lighted it and set a flagon of wine for the guest's further encouragement, but would not add his own company. No entreaties could keep him from his place on the steps. Left alone, Quevedo found the fire smoky, the wine sour, and the room absolutely intolerable. The rich, gloomy hangings bulged as if assassins skulked behind them, the very pictures on the wall moved in their places and followed him with their eyes as he prowled restlessly about. He tried to imagine Soledad as the Countess brightening the despondency of the place, but somehow the effort brought him no cheer. At last he wrapped himself in his cloak and went out to join the buffoon on the steps, humming with affected jauntiness a rhyme from the new comedy that he was writing by the Queen's command—for comedies must be written. There will always be actresses enough—if not one, then another.

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“Were *you* afraid to stay in there?” Panchito demanded.

Quevedo stopped abruptly with a shiver. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“That is the richest room in the house,” said Panchito. “That is the room where he will lie when he is dead. Every time I go into it now I see the coffin waiting.”

“That’s a pretty thought.” Quevedo, with a grimace, took up his song again, shuffling a little dance in time to it, for the damp chill was striking to his bones.

That fortune’s face is double at last we understand
When crumble into rubble the palaces we planned.
In other ways than wooing men trust to their
undoing,
Building—

“Hark, there he is!” said Panchito.

Quevedo listened. They could hear plainly the noise of coach-wheels coming up the Calle Mayor. In a moment the coach came in sight. As it slackened speed to turn the corner a man leaped from the darkness and sent in at the window from a raised crossbow the terrible bolt to which chain-mail was like paper, then darted like a rabbit down a winding side-street.

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Panchito sprang to motion as the coach door was burst open and Villa Mediana's tall figure fell rather than stepped out. He stood for a moment swaying, tugging vainly at his sword, as if it were fastened to the scabbard. At last he got it out; but the relaxing fingers could not keep their hold. The sword jangled on the cobbles, and he fell across it and lay quiet where he fell.

The strange, pallid light gave the whole scene a curious unreality. Quevedo felt like the spectator at a play. Only the dwarf's scream as he flung himself on the body waked him to the realization that it was Villa Mediana who lay there, and with him all that was to be known of Soledad. He ran toward the fallen man, shouting for help, but when he came near he saw that the cry was wasted breath. Panchito had been listening at his master's heart and mouth, and the wild, white face that he lifted to Quevedo was horribly smeared with red.

"It is done," he groaned. "This was no blind archer." Then, with a fierce jerk, he wrenched out the bolt and hid it in his doublet.

"Horrible!" Quevedo caught his arm, think-

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ing he had gone mad. “What do you want of that?”

The dwarf smiled. “It is for a gift,” he said.

Juan de Tassis was laid in state in the room where Quevedo had waited, clothed in crimson velvet, with great candles burning about a richly covered bier as became a grandee of Spain, and under the hands folded on the crucifix the hot heart was cold and quiet enough now. No beautiful widow came to mourn him and claim what had been his. It seemed the Countess of Villa Mediana was as dead as the Count. Quevedo, for one, was so sure of it that he had a mass said for her soul. He knew that Soledad’s love would be a matter of life and death. Villa Mediana’s household disbanded, his dwarf left the city to seek some other employment, and it was finally announced that his goods would be sold by *almoneda*. The palace became a showroom where purchasers might come and go, and the life of the court closed over the place where Juan de Tassis and Soledad had gone down.

VII

CHANGE

AS the winter passed, affairs of state grew more and more pressing, and one evening, toward the end of May, Olivares sighed as he opened the door of his walled garden, knowing that this secret stolen empire which a king had coveted in vain, and which he himself held only at the cost of another man's life and in constant danger of his own, must come to an end. Soledad always heard his step, but only for a few days had she been strong enough to go out to meet him—she had gone far into the Unknown Country to bring him his heir. To-night she carried her son proudly in her arms, well swaddled and sound asleep; he was a comfortable, sturdy child that slept like a kitten. When Olivares did not smile in answer to her greeting, she held out the baby to him as if that were a panacea; but even then his

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anxious gravity only deepened, so she knew that things were very far amiss in that outer world which she had left behind—it seemed a century ago. She laid the baby in his cradle and came to bend over her lord where he sat by the window, her cool hand on his forehead, her cheek against his hair.

“How hot your head is!—you are tired,” she murmured. No more than that, because the outer world was never to be mentioned in this, his resting-place—that had been understood from the first.

He made no answer in words, but he drew her to his knee and looked at her long and earnestly. He had played the perfect lover to her as deliberately and successfully as he had played the perfect friend to the King. He was bitterly unwilling to destroy his work, and yet he must dismiss her and see her worship of him go down in ruins before his eyes. There was no other way.

“Are you happy?” he asked, abruptly

“Happy?” Her blue eyes widened in amazement. Then she laughed and leaned to him, her arms around his neck. “You are joking.”

“You have not answered.”

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“Then I will.” She laughed again, richly, at the absurdity of the question. “To tell you the truth, I am not quite content. It might be enough for any other woman to have Olivares’s love and be the mother of his heir, but I must have more. A string of stars, for instance, to hang around my son’s neck, or Prester John’s signet for him to play with—no! I will tell you what I really want, without nonsense.” Her voice deepened tenderly, and there was passionate adoration in her eyes. “I want to watch him growing up in your likeness—I want to see him standing beside you at last, a son for you to be proud of, whom you can trust to carry on your great work when we two shall be lying at rest.” She stopped. “I forgot,” she whispered after a moment. “I forgot. I saw a little country churchyard like the one at Las Espadas, and we were buried together under a flowering tree like my father and mother—” Her cheek against his own was wet, but she ended bravely enough. “What does it matter, dear? We shall have all our life together.”

The thing that he had to do was unpleasant enough, and she was making it still

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harder. He frowned and shifted uneasily in her clasp.

"No—not even that," he said, harshly.

She drew away so that she could see his face. It was stern and set. She had never seen that look before, because she had never crossed him, and she did not recognize it now for what it was.

"What is troubling you?" she asked, with quick anxiety.

"Did you think this could go on for ever?" he demanded, roughly.

The question and the tone in which he spoke numbed her with astonishment. Even her lips were stiff as she stammered: "This? You and I?"

He saw her consternation with mingled relief and distaste. The ruin of his kingdom had begun. All that remained was to get it over as quickly as possible.

"The wonder is that I have kept it so long a secret," he went on, all pretense gone from the harshness of his voice and manner. "Now it has become impossible to hide you and the child in Madrid—that means that we must part."

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Now she understood what made his look and voice so strange—if to hear that word was agony to her, what must it cost him to speak it? But her courage rose gallantly to meet what she conceived to be his sacrifice. This was the time for the woman who loved Olivares to prove that she, too, could be strong.

“No,” she said, “I will not leave you. Let the world know if it must. I am not ashamed.”

He stared at her amazed, with a touch of sardonic amusement at such unthinkable simplicity. “What do you know of the world?” he flung out.

“As little as I care what it can say of me,” she returned. Soledad was of the martyr-temper, and there was a high joy for her in the thought that she was to be privileged to suffer for her hero. She sprang to her feet and faced him, radiant. “You are my world, Gaspar, by my own choice—and I know that I chose well, because God has blessed us. I tell you now that you have not understood how much I love you—that there is no humiliation I would not bear for you, no power that could drive me from you—”

“And if I tell you that I am tired of you?”

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He rose as he spoke, bringing the words down on her like a blow. He thought that their utter brutality would fell her once and for all; but she only smiled in his lowering face, a triumphant smile that overflowed into a little laugh of confident tenderness. She could have doubted the fact of the ground under her feet more readily than his love and her own loveliness. He caught his breath—even in his anger she had never appealed to his fancy so strongly. He had seen only her gentleness—this was a creature of steel and white fire, dazzling as a sword in the moonlight, and as dangerous. Suddenly she took his face between her hands and kissed him on the mouth—such a kiss as she had never given him before.

“This is my answer to that,” she whispered, as his arms closed around her in spite of himself. “Oh, but you are a poor actor, my lord! You forget that I am no longer a child. I am as you have made me, your woman, the mother of your son. We are yours, he and I—will you be rid of us, Gaspar? Only death can do it.”

A blinding wave of real passion closed over him, and for the moment he would have held

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her so in the face of all Spain. Then the wave passed, leaving him shaken and breathless, but once more Olivares—with a particularly difficult piece of diplomacy before him. While his lips held her silent, his mind leaped from one argument to another with feverish speed. All at once he flung back his head with a laugh as recklessly exultant as her own.

“So be it,” he said. “Let death come—we will meet it together, and be buried together, it may be, after all. You are more to me than life, more than honor, more than Spain.”

“Death?” she repeated, chilled. “What do you mean? Is there danger to you—”

“A man who has tried to serve his country is always in danger,” he replied; but she detected the evasive note as he meant that she should.

“Is there danger to you in this?” she insisted. “Tell me—I have the right to know.”

“Yes,” he said, slowly, “you have the right to know, since the blow, when it falls, will crush not us only, but—our child. I could not have spoken of our parting had the danger been mine alone—you know that.”

“Then it is yours!” That was the part that

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mattered most to her. "Tell me all the truth—you must not try to shield me. I must know it all."

"Yes—you must know it all." He seated himself again in the chair and held out his arms, inviting her to her former place. But she knelt at his feet, her hands clasped on his knee, her eyes fixed on his face.

"During this time we have been together you have never asked for news of your old friends. Have you never thought of them, never wondered what was happening to them?"

"I have thought about my aunt—and Don Francisco." Her voice dropped a little on Quevedo's name. "Often I have wished that I could tell him how happy I am."

"Were they the only ones?"

She went on, puzzled but obedient, her eyes always on his: "And I have thought of my foster-sister Luz at Las Espadas—she is married to Silvano, the smith there—and Father Esteban, who christened me."

He registered the name in his memory with quick satisfaction. The country priest would be her natural refuge, and Las Espadas was on the byroad to his own country house of Loeches.

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"Have you never thought of Don Juan de Tassis?" he asked, gently. "Have you never wondered what became of him when you were gone?"

Soledad shook her head, wondering both at the question and at his way of putting it. "No," she said, "I believe I have not thought of him at all. What difference should my going make to him? I never knew him well."

"Not well enough to see that he loved you?"

"He—loved me?" she exclaimed, incredulously. "Loved me—like you?"

"In more or less the same way," he said, with irony that was lost on her. "Do you remember how he saved you from the burning theater at Aranjuez?" The color rose hotly into her face at that. "It was known afterward that he himself set the building on fire. He meant to claim the life that he had saved. Did you never guess that, Soledad?"

"I did not even know that it was he," she answered. "It was all like a bad dream, and I had forgotten. I am sorry for Don Juan," she added.

"You may well be sorry for him, beloved,"

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said Olivares, deliberately. "He was not the only man who desired you."

"Thank Heaven for that!" she interposed.

But he laid a finger on her lips as he went on, gravely: "Nor was I. Do not make light of it, little one. Villa Mediana is dead."

"Dead!" She crossed herself mechanically. In the books she knew the death of slighted lovers was no uncommon thing. "Do you mean that he died because he loved me?"

"In a way, yes. It was because he loved you that he was murdered."

She could not speak, but her whitened lips shaped the word.

"Murdered," he repeated, "by his Majesty's orders. I warned him, but he would not heed it—the burning of the theater fixed suspicion on him, and before I knew what was coming—Soledad, it is dangerous to be the rival of a king—to be a successful rival, fatal."

She understood. He watched the understanding grow in her eyes till it crowded out everything but her fear for him. He knew that he had won, and with a fine recklessness he raised her in his arms.

"The King must learn the truth sooner or

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later," he cried; "but what does it matter, sweetheart? We have lived—let death come!"

"No, no!" she silenced him as if Philip were listening at the door. "He must never know! I will go away at once—far away—"

"For a time, perhaps"—he seemed to be considering her suggestion. "But I could not let you go to strangers. Is there no one that we can trust—no friend of your father's—"

"Father Esteban!" She caught at the word eagerly. "He will find me a home until—it is safe for me to be with you again. It would not be long, would it? A year, perhaps—surely the King would forget in a year—"

"Forget?" He laughed bitterly. "Do you think a man could forget you in a year—or a thousand?" He bit his lip as if to gather all his self-control. "Forgive me, dear," he said, "I am making it harder for you when it is hard enough for us both, God knows. Sooner or later—I pray it may be sooner!—we shall be together again, in peace. And till then—Las Espadas is on the road to Loeches!"

"Gaspar!" She held him at arm's-length and spoke solemnly. "The one thing that could break my heart would be for you or for

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our son to come to harm through me. You must not come to me, you must not write to me, you must not send a token that a spy could follow, you must not even pass through Las Espadas till all is safe. Give me your word!"

"You ask much of me," he said.

"But no more than you will give. I will wait for you, if it should be a year or all my life—you will always know where to find me when the time comes; but till it comes you must not even look that way. For our son's sake, Gaspar, not for yours or mine! Give me your word."

He rubbed his hands wearily across his eyes and stood for a moment pressing his temples. She was too dangerous to play with—once rid of her, he must be rid of her for ever—and yet—

"I give it," he said, with a heavy sigh that was not pretense. "Trust me to keep it, Soledad." He looked at her musingly.

She followed his glance and looked back at him with a distressed question in her eyes—it had been part of his pride in her to dress her like a princess.

"I will attend to that," he said. "To-

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morrow I will send you a dress in which you can travel safely." He paused, and his mouth tightened to a thin line of determination. He took a ring from his purse and set it on her marriage-finger.

"While we were together," he said, in a strange, hard voice, "there was no need of this. Now it is your right—and it will answer questions before they are asked."

She had thought herself above conventions, but she pressed the sapphire circle gratefully to her lips and then hid her face on his breast with a sudden rush of tears. He looked down on her bent head with an ironic twist of the mouth that had in it something of pain.

"I have had this for you," he said, "since the night you told me about our child."

VIII

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SHE came to Las Espadas in the twilight. The coach left her at the priest's door and then drove back toward Madrid, so that nobody saw her coming—she might have dropped from the stars. Father Esteban's little house was dark and empty. She was feeling desperately tired, and sat down on the door-step to wait till he should return. There was no sound but the evening stir of wind in the cypresses about the church and its graveyard, and the brawling of the tawny little river beyond. The world seemed suddenly to have grown as dark and empty as the cottage. Panting, she put back the heavy veil from her face. The touch of it gave her a vague horror. Till that moment she had thought of it only as a means of disguise; but now it came to her that she had seen widows wear such veils.

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With the thought a chill shook her. The darkness became a menace—she felt she must go mad if she did not get to lights and voices and human faces.

She rose with an effort and drove herself on into the town, the weight of the baby almost more than she could carry. Presently she saw lighted windows, and moved toward them instinctively. From within came a homely noise of plates and a woman's low singing like the evening chirp of a bird. Soledad could see now that the woman was Luz, plump and rosy as ever. Once she broke off in the middle of a note to laugh delightedly at some household joke that Silvano's deep voice called from an adjoining room. Something in the quiet stability of it all sent such a pain through Soledad's heart that it seemed to stop beating for a moment, and she closed her eyes against the warm hearth-light as against an unbearable radiance, holding the baby so tightly that he cried in resentment. The sound brought a familiar figure to the door, yapping vigilance, and she knew the priest must be there.

"Perro, have you forgotten me?" she chided the dog, gently.

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Busy little Luz set down the dish in her hands, and with a cry of "Sister! oh, sister!" she ran to the door. Before the two men could come from the adjoining room Luz had drawn Soledad over the threshold and had snatched the baby into her own arms.

"What is his name?" she asked, breathlessly. "How old is he?"

"Gaspar," said Soledad. "He is about two months old, I think—"

Luz stared at her, astonished and almost indignant. If Our Lady prospered her hopes, she would be able to tell her baby's age to a second, whenever asked. Then her look softened to anxious pity again. "Have you had supper?" was her next question, and at Soledad's listless shake of the head she nodded wisely. "That's what the matter is," she said. "Sit down and you shall have something warm and nourishing before you have time to smell it cooking."

Little Gaspar still on her arm, she hustled Silvano out of the room, leaving Soledad to the care of the priest. Father Esteban hesitated, uncertain what to say.

"I came to you, Father Esteban," said

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Soledad. "I could not stay in Madrid any longer."

The weariness and desolation of her voice and look made Father Esteban blink and blow his nose.

"Poor child!" he said. "You have done well to come to me. Your sorrow will be respected here."

"You know?" Soledad's eyes widened in alarm.

The priest glanced sympathetically at her widow's dress and laid his thin, brown hand kindly on her hand that wore the sapphire ring.

"Knew of your husband's murder? Dear child, the whole of Castile was ringing with it. A terrible crime! If only we could have found you in the first of your grief—but nobody knew where you were, though not a traveler went through the village that he did not ask for news of the Countess Villa Mediana—"

"You must not call me that!" Soledad sprang to her feet, strangely white, her hands at her breast.

"Soledad!" The priest lowered his voice. "Is there still danger? Can the King be so godless—"

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Soledad looked at him blankly, steadying herself with a hand on the back of the settle from which she had risen. She was dimly aware that he was still speaking, but she heard nothing more.

She knew presently that she had gone down under the earth to find Villa Mediana and tell him that she was sorry he had been killed for her sake. When she saw him he had the face of Quevedo and looked at her so kindly that she begged him to let her shield her lover with his name for a little while—only for a little while! since now it could do him no more harm. Then he had said, like Father Esteban: “Poor child! Poor child!” Sad as his voice was it comforted her, and she longed in her weariness to rest there among the dead; but she remembered that she must go back to Gaspar’s son, and began to push her way up through the earth that lay heavy over her. Villa Mediana could not help her, because he was a spirit; but as she struggled against the smothering weight she heard his voice near her—“Poor child, poor child!”—softer and softer till it was like a woman’s. She opened her eyes. Luz was hovering over her like a little motherly bird.

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“There, there,” she murmured, “lie quiet and rest till I give you some broth. Then I will put you to bed, and you shall have a good sleep and wake fresh and strong to-morrow.” Her foot was velvet as she went out, but in the kitchen she stamped it at Father Esteban. “Of course she will be all right—only leave her to me. Pitying saints!” she scolded, “does a priest who ought to be nearly as sensible as a woman know no better than to begin talking about her husband’s murder to a born lady with an empty stomach and a baby not two months old—poor lamb?”

Of course Soledad stayed on at the house by the smithy. Luz would have defended her if necessary against the combined forces of darkness, and would have trusted the task to no one else. As for material matters, Don Jaime had given Luz her dowry, and her house was freely open to her foster-sister. The purse that Soledad gave her seemed to her a fortune to be exclaimed over with round eyes of amazement and promptly buried under the hearth against a rainy day. Soledad, never having lacked money, never thought of it—it was one of the things she took for granted, like air and

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light and kindness. Of these three there was never any scarcity at the house by the smithy, and little Gaspar thrived on them. He was one of those friendly, happy-natured babies that it is impossible to know intimately and not to love, and he had made himself so large a place in the hearts of Silvano and Luz by the time their own child was born that they were quite reconciled to its proving a daughter, for they felt that they had already a son.

Little Gaspar was beginning his second year, and was well worth a painter's interest when Velasquez again took the road to Madrid; but this time Don Diego was obeying an official summons, accompanied by a substantial purse for traveling-expenses, and he had no time for byways. He found no disappointment at his journey's end this time, but encouragement that put lovely ladies for the moment clean out of his head. Madrid was again in a stir, but it was agitation that might turn to the profit of art instead of crowding it out of sight. There had been talk of a marriage between the Infanta Maria and Prince Charles of England, and the Prince, bent upon infusing some romance into the dreary business of a royal alliance, had come

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to woo in person, accompanied by the magnificent Buckingham, who was to attend to the political side of the affair while the Prince busied himself with sentiment. They were respectively learning the irksome sacredness of royalty's person, according to Spanish etiquette, and the supremely elusive character of Spanish diplomacy, that lesson which no English-speaking generation seems to be able to pass on to its successor.

Fonseca insisted that Velasquez should become an inmate of his house till fortune should open the palace doors, and a portrait of the reverend gentleman was begun, pending the advent of greater patrons. Fonseca entertained his guest during the sittings with spicy details of the "English Invasion," as the Liars' Walk had dubbed it.

"If those are the manners of the court of England! Why, over the wall into her garden he went as if he had been a stable-boy courting a kitchen-wench—"

"Or a cardinal after a duchess," chuckled a voice at the painter's elbow. Velasquez, who had thought they were alone, looked down in astonishment and saw a dwarf squatting

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beside him, turning over the sketches of a portfolio.

"I just came in—you have not missed much of me," the new-comer observed, calmly, with a peculiarly hideous grin.

"El Hermoso is a privileged character," Fonseca explained. "A new addition to his Excellency's household, but already a favorite."

"My beauty accounts for that as it does for my name," the dwarf put in. "My lord talked of having my portrait painted, and, as I hear you well spoken of, I came to get a taste of your quality before trusting my person to your brush."

"I hope you find me worthy," said Velasquez, gravely.

"As nearly so as I could hope," El Hermoso assented, with equal gravity.

"I am glad. You will make an interesting picture."

"Serviceable word, interesting—when one does not know what else to say."

The painter gave him another searching glance. The little creature was really to be described by the word Velasquez had chosen, and by hardly any other. His figure, with its

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short legs and grotesquely broad shoulders, was like that of twenty other court dwarfs—it was his face that caught the painter's eye with the pathos of a fine thing marred by mischance. It had been disfigured by two crossing slashes, one of which extinguished an eye, while the other hitched the corner of the upper lip in a perpetual sneer and gave a thick lisp to his speech. Clean-shaven, the buffoon seemed cynically to parade this mutilation, but Velasquez, with pity, guessed it to be exhibited as part of his trade.

"You are wondering what scarred me?" asked the dwarf, with a harsh laugh. "I know the look—and others have not been as delicate as you. Because you have not asked, I will tell you. It was done on purpose."

"These outrages on helpless children should be stopped—" Velasquez began, hotly; then a sudden thought sent his eyes back to the marred face. "But those scars are still red!" he exclaimed, curiously.

"Some hurts never heal," was the dwarf's grim answer. "Back to work, Don Diego, back to work. His Reverence is fidgeting."

Velasquez gave his whole attention again to Fonseca, and the painting progressed while El

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Hermoso amused himself with the portfolio and Fonseca returned to a highly laudatory description of the Count-Duke's methods with the Englishmen.

"He does what he chooses with the two of them—puts them on and takes them off like a pair of gloves. Mark my words, before he is done with them he will have—"

The reverend gentleman's prophecy was interrupted by a cry from El Hermoso. He held up a small, unmounted canvas, his hand shaking absurdly with burlesque agitation.

"What beauty!" he ejaculated. "What beauty! Is it your own invention, Don Diego, or is it possible that I have a sister somewhere in the world?"

"Not my invention—my memory," returned Velasquez. "Show it to his Reverence—he saw the sketch for it two years ago, and has seen the original since, no doubt. I went back to Las Espadas when I left here, and they told me she had gone up to Madrid. Is she here now?"

"Poor child! God knows where she is." Fonseca crossed himself as for the dead. "In heaven, I hope."

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Velasquez bent his head for a moment, and his lips moved. "Heaven is the lovelier then," he said, simply. "I am glad I saw her that one time."

"But who is—or was would be better, I take it—who was the lady?" asked El Hermoso, whose single eye had been traveling sharply from one to the other. "I am a stranger, you know, and memories seem to be short in this fine city."

Fonseca sketched the story of La Soledad as Madrid conceived it. El Hermoso listened attentively, a forefinger crooked over his disfigured mouth.

"It's a simple story, after all, as you tell it," he remarked. "Life seldom goes as simply as that. I had two brothers, for instance, and they both loved green apples. One stole the apples, but by some mistake the other got the physic and died of it. That's the way things go as a rule. Villa Mediana—rest his soul!—seems to have been lucky, if he had what he paid for. So few do." He surveyed the picture again before he laid it down. "Where did you say she lived? There may be more like her in that town."

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“Not likely.” Velasquez sighed. “You may easily see for yourself, though—it is near your master’s country house of Loeches. Las Espadas is the name of the place—when first I heard it, it had a dismal sound to me.”

The picture of Fonseca was successfully finished and, after the custom, was exhibited on the sidewalk opposite the Liars’ Walk. It drew a loudly praising crowd immediately, but the keenest popular interest was aroused not by the finished portrait but by the head of La Soledad, which the painter also exhibited by Fonseca’s advice. The prestige of his subjects and his own supreme workmanship sent his fame through the city as swiftly and thoroughly as Soledad’s own had gone. When the great Olivares made time among his many duties to visit personally the studio in Fonseca’s house, the young painter’s dreams began to come true.

Buckingham came with the Count-Duke to inspect the pictures, and Velasquez ardently wished that he might paint the two together upon one canvas. It was a study in contrasts. The handsome Englishman was superbly, insolently magnificent. He outshone Villa Mediana at his grandest, and, unlike Villa Mediana,

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he was intensely conscious of his own splendor, alert for its effect. It seemed as if, knowing himself defeated at the game of diplomacy, he was determined to excel at least in personal grandeur and in arrogance of bearing. In this move also he was no match for Spanish subtlety. The more gorgeous was Buckingham, the more austere simple grew the apparel of his great adversary. On this day each had touched his own extreme. They were both in black velvet, and the single similarity made the difference all the more emphatic. Buckingham's black was a mere background for a wonderful mosaic of white and gold, strewn with jewels in such meaningless profusion that they defeated their wearer's object and gave the effect of paste.

His face, beautiful as it was, was not effeminate, but, surmounting such a costume and framed with scented ringlets, it was like the face of a doll. Olivares at his worst was a man, and a strong one. Beside this pretty butterfly he seemed a giant. His dress was severely plain, and a single great order hung on his breast; but with a cruel humor he had decked his jester with unusual sumptuousness, and El

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Hermoso looked like a frightful caricature of the exquisite Englishman. Altogether, they were a group that made Velasquez's fingers tingle on his brushes.

"You have a portrait of La Soledad, I hear," said Olivares, carelessly, to the painter, when the first formalities had been exchanged and Fonseca was displaying the excellence of his portrait to Buckingham.

"Only a sketch made from memory," Velasquez explained, producing it. El Hermoso watched the Count-Duke's face as he scanned the picture, but it told nothing.

"From memory?" said Olivares. "That is a great gift of yours. I remember—Fonseca told me you saw her at a window, or something of the sort. Remarkable—it is a wonderful likeness."

"It is not a face easily to be forgotten, your Excellency."

The great man stood with his eyes fixed on the picture, but to the dwarf's intense scrutiny it seemed that the glittering eyes grew dull and veiled under their heavy, unblinking lids, as if their vision were turned inward. The single jewel on his broad chest flashed quickly, lifted by a deep, inaudible breath.

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"I buy this," said Olivares, indifferently. "Tell my secretary your price for it and he will pay you."

He acknowledged Velasquez's thanks with a grave inclination of the head, and turned to bestow a discreet commendation on the chaplain's portrait. El Hermoso looked after him thoughtfully, whistling a popular song between his teeth.

"But where is the beautiful actress, Don Diego?" asked Buckingham. "I am curious to see that picture."

Velasquez looked to Olivares for permission, and, receiving a nod of assent after a barely perceptible hesitation, he showed the canvas to Buckingham. The Englishman was instant in admiration.

"Was this the face that launched a thousand ships and burned the topless towers of Ilium?" he demanded.

"No, your Grace—I never heard of her burning anything but her own bridges, poor girl." El Hermoso peered up quizzically at Olivares. "What kind of man was the Count of Villa Mediana, master?"

"Very like his grace of Buckingham," returned Olivares, calmly.

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"Well"—the dwarf nodded after an appraising glance—"many a lady would say the experience was cheap at the price."

"It is a pity I came too late," Buckingham mused. "Who knows—Spanish love is probably like Spanish weather, all flame and frost—our more temperate climate might have suited her better."

Olivares's nostrils dilated ever so little. He held out his hand for the picture, but Buckingham did not give it up.

"Pardon me, but I cannot let her go so easily," he said, smiling. "I will buy this picture, Don Diego."

"I am sorry to disappoint your Grace," the painter answered, "but it now belongs to his Excellency."

"You?" Buckingham turned to Olivares with amused surprise. "Are you human, then? Or perhaps"—he smiled with open insolence—"perhaps you are buying this also for his Majesty?"

El Hermoso, watching, saw the Count-Duke's throat move as if he swallowed the insult in some tangible form. When Olivares spoke it was with a noble and courteous dignity that

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made Buckingham's sneer seem mere boyish impertinence.

"I bought the picture to destroy it, that his Majesty might not happen to see it and so be reminded of painful things that are best forgotten. If it is taken out of Spain the same end will be served in a way that pleases me better, for I love art too well to be happy in the destruction of a masterpiece. May I beg your Grace to accept the picture as a gift from me?"

Buckingham flushed under the rebuke, but he received the gift like the great gentleman he so well knew how to be when he chose. El Hermoso burst into a rasping laugh.

"A painful thing, best forgotten—souls in purgatory, but that's a sad epitaph for a pretty woman! Well, *sic transit gloria!* So good-by, La Soledad!"

It was some days before El Hermoso could secure the time to gratify his curiosity; but at last he rode down to Las Espadas. He was dressed as a vagabond buffoon, a battered lute bumping his stumpy back with every jog of his mule. In an open space before the village smithy he climbed comically down from his

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saddle, and began to sing a jingling catch that was popular in the streets of Madrid:

In bliss I was begotten, in bitterness was born,
For love was dead and rotten ere thrice three moons
 had worn.

What yesterday called pleasure to-day is misery's
 measure,

And reverence forgotten the final sting of scorn.

As he pranced grotesquely in time to the interlude, his single eye searched the little crowd that was gathering, delighted by this unexpected entertainment. A little boy, taking his first steps in the world on sturdy, carefully planted feet, toddled from the garden of the house by the smithy, pushing his way imperiously to the very front of the audience. He was a large, strongly built child of swarthy coloring, but the eyes that he fixed in a fascinated stare on El Hermoso were vividly blue. The dwarf took a quick breath, and, squatting before the baby, sang the next verse straight to him:

That fortune's face is double at last we understand
When crumble into rubble the palaces we planned.
In other ways than wooing men trust to their un-
 doing,

Building of sticks and stubble a house upon the sand.

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The child laughed in high glee and tried to imitate the singer's grimaces. Overbalancing himself, he clung to the shoulder of the dwarf, who winced involuntarily as if the touch repelled him. Still clinging to his prop, the child began to pull at a cord about El Hermoso's neck.

"No, no—let that alone!" the buffoon admonished, seriously. "That is the string of my scapular."

José, the innkeeper, had bent over the pair, proud of the child's boldness. "You wear a heavy scapular, then," he said, laughing. "The cord cuts your neck. Gently, Gaspar."

"I have a relic with it—the relic of a martyr," said the dwarf in a choked voice. He held the child from him with a quick thrust and stared piercingly at him. "What did you say this fine youngster's name is?"

Before the innkeeper could answer a woman's voice called from the house: "Gaspar! Gaspar, where are you?"

She came into the doorway, taller than ever in her straight black gown, her blue eyes anxiously searching the company in the road till they found her son. At her call Gaspar

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ran stumblingly to her, babbling excitedly, pulling at her skirts and those of Luz, who held up her Rosaria, a swaddled roll of supreme indifference, to see the stranger. El Hermoso went through the rest of his performance like a mechanical toy, his brain whirling. As he rode back toward Madrid he lifted his face to the sky. The fierce pleasure in it disfigured it more than did the scars.

“Father and son!” he sang to himself over and over. “Father and son! So much the better.”

His hand groped in his breast and closed on the heavy relic that hung there. As he entered the city a beggar whined for alms. El Hermoso flung him the coppers that Las Espadas had dropped into his hat.

“Don’t waste your prayers on me, brother,” he called, with a snarling laugh. “There are others who need them more—far more—and I can attend to my own business.”

IX

“YOU ARE HIS HEIR”

SPAIN made much history in the years that followed, when back to back with Austria she fought the allied forces of Europe. This was the time above all others when Olivares needed that invincible sword of United Spain; but alas for his dream, such a weapon requires long forging. Necessity and ambition alike drove him to fatal haste, for Aragon, Catalonia, Portugal, and the rest were no more ready to surrender their ancient liberties than were the colonists of the New World, a century later. The story of the Thirty Years' War is written in so many books that there is no need of putting it in one more. The history of Las Espadas for those same years was limited to one volume, the parish register—marriages, births, and deaths. Dull reading—but not dull living for the bride and groom who meet the untried miraele of life

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with wonder and a little fear, nor to the young father who waits in a cold sweat of helplessness while his child wrestles into the world, nor to those who bear bravely the fall of the clods on the coffin, but break down at sight of the chairs set a little farther apart around the table.

Luz's name was on a stone among the cypresses by the river, and in the house by the smithy Rosaria had grown so like Luz in her bridal days that sometimes Silvano unconsciously called his daughter by her mother's name. Like changes had come to all the village, and through all changes, great and small, Soledad waited. That was her history.

She waited, living from day to day, from year to year, in the constant hope of Gaspar de Guzman's coming, a hope that sapped her like a vampire living on the blood it drew from her. Little by little she wasted till at last all her vitality seemed concentrated in her expectant eyes; but as life failed in her, it rose in her son. He had always been large and strong, looking older than his age, overflowing with spirit, a leader among the village boys. He adored strength, and haunted the forge when Silvano was at work, watching the smith's expert hand-

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ling of the iron and imitating it as far as he could at every opportunity. As a boy his fondest ambition was to be able to use the big sledge that nobody but Silvano could swing.

One day Soledad, passing the smithy, heard his laugh ring out through the hammer-strokes, and realized that the treble note was gone. This was the laugh of a young man triumphant in some long-hoped-for achievement. She looked in. Gaspar stood at the anvil, his sleeves rolled back, his shirt open so that she could see the play of the muscles in his neck and chest as he swung the great sledge. The blue eyes that were so startling in his dark face flashed joyously in the forge-light as he looked for approval to the smith. Silvano stood by directing the work, his eyes dwelling on the boy with proud, grave tenderness.

Velasquez would have given much for the picture, but to the mother it was all bitterness. She had lived from day to day—now in one pitiless revelation she saw how many the days had been. Her son was a man, and he stood there, the very likeness of his father, *happy* in the approval of a blacksmith. And she had nothing else to offer him! She closed her eyes against

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the sight, praying passionately: “Send him, O God! Send him, send him, send him!” Rosaria saw her there—the eyes strained shut, the moving lips bracketed with deep lines of pain—and the sight opened to her vistas of beauty and terror. This was what it meant to love and to lose, she thought—Gaspar had reminded Soledad of his father. It did not occur to her for an instant that her father’s trade could seem ignoble to any one, even to a countess.

After that day Soledad forced herself sometimes to speak to Gaspar of his father—his strength, his nobility, his unselfishness. As the young man listened, his father became to him a hero of dreams like the Cid and Olivares, with the added glamour of mystery—a king of men strangely and terribly dead long ago—one whose name was never spoken even by Soledad.

That winter Gaspar became the smith’s recognized associate in his work. That was a blow under which Soledad went down. They told each other that she felt the cold—that she would be stronger with the spring—but the thickets by the river budded, and she was not even strong enough so that Gaspar could carry her out to sit in the sunny corner by the south wall. She lay

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in her room looking out on the garden. Rosaria, passing her window, always smiled in greeting; but sometimes the girl waked in fright from a dream of that watcher at the window with eyes so like Gaspar's and yet so fearfully different.

One day, as Rosaria came back from a neighbor's house, she quickened her pace with a pleased exclamation, for she saw in the road ahead the buffoon who had passed that way every year since she was born. She did not know his name—she and Gaspar always called him the Funny Little Man. He was rather dreadful in appearance, but the children had grown used to his jokes and his gifts before they knew that, so they were never afraid of him. He was just turning the corner, and he reined in his mule as he met Rosaria.

"Well, well! I feared I was to miss you this time. I left a ribbon for you to wear at the next fiesta with that brother of yours."

This was one of his regular jokes. At first the children had agreed to it with much glee between themselves. Then they had laughed, but denied it. Now—

"He's not my brother," said Rosaria, and blushed quite unexpectedly to herself.

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“Is that so?” said the dwarf, as much to the blush as to the denial. He looked at her steadily—all the more so, it seemed, because he did it with one eye. He even put a finger-tip under her chin and turned her face up a little so that he could see it better. His own face was strangely sad. “It’s a great pity,” he said, with a sigh. Then, quickly screwing up his face in a grimace that made her laugh, he added: “That one cannot have an omelet without breaking eggs. Very sad, I say. Think of it next time you beat the poor things. God guard you, child—if He can.”

He rode on as far as Loeches. There he entered with the air more of a master than of a servant, threw his reins to one groom, his hat to a second, and extended his short legs one after the other for a third to pull off his boots.

“Has his Excellency come yet?” he demanded.

“Not yet.”

“Watch for him, then. He should be here within the hour.”

El Hermoso mounted leisurely to his room and changed his dusty suit for the rich garments with which it pleased Olivares’s sardonic humor to adorn his jester’s deformity. Once dressed,

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he curled himself in the wide ledge by the window and watched the highroad by which his Excellency's coach would come. He sat hugging his knees, his face puckered thoughtfully. At last he saw the coach in the distance, a speck on the road. With a heavy sigh he took from his pocket a set of dice, tiny cubes of amethyst speckled with gold, and began playing, his left hand against his right. The left hand won two successive casts, and he pocketed the dice again.

"No help for it—she must take her chances," said El Hermoso. Then, with a weary groan, "Why in Heaven's name must just vengeance lie so sour and heavy on the stomach?"

When the coach came into the courtyard he craned his neck out of the window like a gargoyle to watch the arrival. Olivares was accompanied by his nephew, Don Luis de Haro, whom the world had already accepted as the Count-Duke's heir, since the death of his daughter had put a stop to any hope of a grandson. Olivares, indeed, having tried Don Luis under various circumstances and found him a serviceable if not brilliant helper, had come to the conclusion that he could do no better, and though no words had passed formally on the

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subject, it was well understood between them. El Hermoso knew this—he also had gauged Don Luis, a swarthy, saturnine young man of few words, by no means a safe person to play fast and loose with. The gargoyle smiled down on the couple, not in benediction.

When El Hermoso presented himself before the Count-Duke, he was apparently in the highest spirits. He contented himself with commonplace jokes and veiled allusions till Don Luis had retired, then he chuckled inordinately, wagging his head shrewdly at Olivares.

“I would not speak before him,” he said. “No use to lay temptation in a young man’s way, especially with a good career before him. It would be a bad thing for him to get his mouth made up for a dish that is bound to the King’s table. Men have died for that; have they not, master?”

Olivares lay back in his arm-chair, tired and preoccupied. His mind was feverishly busy with a hundred things—the adverse tide of war; threatened rebellion in Portugal; his own peril from the enmity of the Queen, no longer to be despised since she had given the King a son; Philip’s increasing restiveness that might at any

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moment turn to distrust; murmuring and disaffection throughout the country. He returned to El Hermoso's question so perfunctory an assent that it was quite evident the words had started no echo in his memory. The dwarf stared incredulously at the sallow face, heavily grooved with sickness and fatigue, the purple painting of sleeplessness on the closed eyelids. He struck his breast, and the hidden iron bruised the flesh. The blood that had followed that bolt when he tore it from Villa Mediana's dead body had stained all his world as red as the slippery stones of the Calle Mayor. Here was a man who could forget all that and more—even more.

"I had good fortune to-day," El Hermoso continued his waggish tone with an effort. "I have seen a pretty girl—prettier than his Majesty has seen in a long time, I'll be bound."

Olivares opened his eyes.

"A peasant," El Hermoso went on, "but a rosebud—oh, a rosebud! She lives at the smithy of a village near here—plague my stupidity, I forgot to ask the name—"

"But you could find the place?"

"Could even show it to your Excellency—to-morrow, if you like."

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Olivares closed his eyes again, his brows contracted. If only the pain in his head would let him think clearly! A peasant—well, that might make the affair the more piquant, if the girl were really a beauty. There had been a sore dearth of toys for the King lately, and it was especially important now that his attention be distracted from affairs of foreign and domestic policy—also that the Queen’s influence should be kept as weak as possible. The man was not as easy to handle as the boy had been.

“Very well—to-morrow I will inspect your rose-garden.” Olivares glanced at the dwarf with approval. “You are a faithful dog.”

“We have grown gray together, your Excellency, you and I.” A curious smile lifted the scarred lip. “That is the one virtue that I can claim,” he added—“faithfulness.”

The next morning Rosaria woke with a singing heart, and wondered drowsily why she was so happy. Then she remembered—it was Gaspar’s holy day—the event toward which the last fortnight had been marching. She was hard to please at her dressing, but at last she ran from her room singing softly to herself—she had

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her mother's heart full of music that overflowed in little wordless chants. The sound of hammer and anvil from the smithy welcomed her. He was at work as he had promised, finishing his task early so that they might have the day together, he and she. It behooved her also to be busy; but she stole a moment first to peep in at the smithy window. Just as she reached it she met Father Esteban.

"Is Gaspar at work so early?" asked the priest.

Rosaria could not have told why she looked earnestly in at the window before answering yes, but she was undeniably guilty of that subterfuge. The old man's smile was a caress.

"Do I not know?" he murmured. "I have been father—even if only Father Esteban—to so many little maids like you. I did not expect," he went on, "to find him so industrious. I had half thought he might play truant to-day."

"We are both going to finish all we have to do and go out by the river," she said.

"Be careful," he admonished, gravely, but with a twinkling eye; "be careful not to go too near the bank unless you have a good hold on his hand. The shores are steep and slippery,

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and it runs deep, that river of ours.” He touched her cheek with a quizzical finger. “That is a better paint than any they sell in Madrid.”

“I have made some of the cakes that he likes,” she said. Rosaria could not for the life of her have put her heart into speech; but the priest understood. He patted her shoulder very gently.

“You are always doing kindnesses, little one. Will you go in now and see whether Doña Soledad is awake and would like to see me?”

As she disappeared into the house, Gaspar came from the smithy, stretching wide his arms that still tingled with the assurance of their own strength, drawing the clear air into his deep chest, and smiling frankly about him at the beauty of the day. The priest was pleased to see his eager glance toward the house. Not strange, he thought, that Rosaria’s idea of the archangel Michael should be a magnified Gaspar, beating the Prince of Darkness through space with a sledge. The boy welcomed the old man with real fondness, but their hands had hardly touched when Rosaria pulled the priest’s sleeve. She did not speak, but Father

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Esteban, after one glance at her, seemed to understand and went quickly into the house. She followed, but when she realized that Gaspar was coming after her, she stopped him—not, however, before he had seen the priest enter Soledad's door.

“Don't go in now,” said Rosaria, quietly. “There is nothing you could do. If—if you ought to come he will call you, but don't go unless he calls. She will be better soon, I know—” Her voice broke at the sight of his helpless consternation. “Sit down.” She urged him gently into a chair by the table. “We will let you know as soon as she is better.”

Gaspar, his chin on his palms, sat dazed where she had put him. He had realized in a general way that his mother was never to be well again—but that he was actually to lose her never had struck him as a possibility. He heard Rosaria's light feet coming and going as she brought the priest the simple remedies he called for—he was physician to the bodies as well as to the souls of Las Espadas. Tensely, as he listened for every sound from the sick-room, his thought followed subconsciously the tread of those willing little feet. His eyes were

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fixed on an object that stood before him on the table, and he became suddenly aware that it was a reed basket full of his favorite cakes. This must be Rosaria's gift for his holy day. His holy day! At the thought of what the day might bring his head went down on his arms. Rosaria's touch on his shoulder roused him.

“She is better now,” she said. “Father Esteban is with her. She will see you soon.”

“She is not—”

“No, no!” She smiled at him with quick reassurance. “She had a bad turn, that is all—she is resting comfortably now.”

Gaspar's spirits rose with a bound. He gave a great sigh of relief, and with a quick turn of the head he kissed the capable little hand that lay on his shoulder. Rosaria took it away hastily and stepped back. Gaspar rose, taking the reed basket tenderly in his hands.

“You made these for me?” he said.

She nodded. Knowing how short Soledad's reprieve might be, her heart ached for him, and she impulsively took from the folds of her bodice something that she tucked into his hand, taking away the basket as she did so. “I want to give you this, too,” she said.

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Gaspar looked at the chaplet of shining beads, milky in his hard, brown palm. Then his eyes went to her face and there they stayed. "Your first communion rosary!" he whispered. "The one you love so!"

"I have mother's brown one," she murmured. Both had instinctively lowered their voices as in a sacred place.

"We will pray with this together," said Gaspar.

Silvano surprised the lovely awkwardness of a first embrace—sweeter than almond cakes and holier even than a first-communion rosary. After one glance the smith came forward and held the boy by the shoulder while he looked steadily into the blue eyes. Then he nodded slowly.

"You are a good boy," he said, "and you will be good to my little girl. I am glad of this."

"You shall never be sorry," said Gaspar, solemnly.

Father Esteban had come from Soledad's room looking very worn and old. He took in the meaning of the group at a glance, and little wrinkles of pain gathered about his eyes.

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“Go in, Gaspar,” he said, gently. “Your mother can see you now.”

“And I have the best medicine for her!” cried Gaspar. He swept Rosaria into his mother’s room with a proprietary arm.

The priest made a movement as if he would have stopped them, then he stood back with a sigh, his brows contracted in a frown of pity that had a touch of sternness. He slipped his arm in Silvano’s, and they went out. As they paced up and down before the house, he told the smith of Soledad’s sickness, in which the physician’s eye saw the beginning of the end. The smith was a man of few words.

“I am glad the children’s happiness came in time for her to know it,” he said at last.

The priest, wiser and sadder by one more confession, did not look at him. He covered his eyes for a moment with a hand that trembled a little, and his lips moved.

When Soledad saw Gaspar and Rosaria in the doorway, she knew without words what they had to tell her. For a moment she closed her eyes, and Rosaria saw on her face such a look as it had worn by the smithy window. The girl found herself all at once able to under-

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stand many things that had been hidden from her till now—among others, she understood why Soledad should not want to look at her just now. She stooped and kissed the sick woman's hand, clenched on the coverlet, then she slipped from the room, closing the door behind her. She meant that she would never come between Gaspar and his mother, and she hoped Soledad would understand.

Soledad did understand, but the girl's tenderness was no comfort to her—rather the contrary. She lay for a moment with her eyes closed, gathering her strength. Then she looked at him and smiled as cheerfully as she could. His own smile answered her eagerly.

"I knew it would make you happy!" he said.

"It—startled me, at first," she murmured. "I had not realized that you had gone so far in a man's thoughts—"

"And it will not change anything, you see!" he put in, joyously. "We can go on just as we are, only—"

Soledad took her decisive step.

"No," she said, quietly. "Not just as we are. There is something I must tell you."

Gaspar was sitting on the edge of the bed.

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Some strange solemnity in her tone brought him to his knees beside her. Soledad framed his face in her weak hands and looked long at him. This was not only the heir of Olivares, this was her son, flesh of her flesh—and of his. And the girl whose kiss was still warm on her hand was a woman who could love—and suffer—as she herself had done.

“My dear,” she said; and he leaned nearer to her. Not even when she spoke of his father had he ever heard that tone from her. “Has any one but myself ever spoken to you of your father?”

He shook his head. “Only Luz, when I was little. She said I must never ask you about him because he had died so sadly—”

“She thought so. He is not dead.”

Gaspar made an inarticulate sound of astonishment.

“He is a grandee of Spain—and noble—there is none nobler. Never doubt that. I left him—through no fault of his—no, nor of mine. It was—something too strong for us—” She stopped, her face deathly against the pillow. “Oh,” she moaned, “I thought I could tell you, but—”

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After a moment she went on.

"You are his only son—his heir. Do you understand what that means?" She saw by his face that the point she meant to make was lost on him, but she had no strength to press it. "There have been reasons why we could not be with him—you and I. But I think—without me—you would be safe. And I can let it go no longer—I might die, and you, not knowing—oh, you must see that you cannot be just to Rosaria or to yourself unless you know! She must be sure what she is doing when she gives herself to you—as I—"

She was silent, spent. Then she groped feebly in her bosom. For a long time her finger had been too thin to hold the sapphire ring, and she had worn it on a ribbon about her neck.

"Take this," she whispered. "To Madrid. Tell him—I have sent you. He will know—your father—"

Again her voice failed. The sapphires lying on her thin breast shook with the heavy beating of her overtaxed heart. Gaspar took the ribbon gently from her neck and hung it about his own, bewildered by the suddenness with which his life was expanding.

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“Who is your friend, mother? The one who knows my father?”

She was too weary to explain his mistake. Her pale lips simply shaped rather than uttered the word “Olivares.”

“Olivares? The Count-Duke?” he repeated, incredulously. “He knows my father?” His face glowed.

That name was a magic word for him. The village wiseacres talked of little else, and always in their talk that name stood for power. It might be coupled with curses, and usually was, but even in the curses they called him the strongest man in Spain. And this was to be his guide into the great world! Gaspar’s dreams for his own and Rosaria’s future soared with an almost appalling swiftness.

“When shall I go?” he asked, eagerly. “To-day?”

She moved her head in assent, and, as he stooped and kissed her with a loving roughness, tears gathered hotly under her heavy lids, not to fall till she should be alone. She knew that, once gone, Gaspar would not return to her or to Rosaria—that the world would take him as

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it had taken his father—that she would never see Olivares again, not even in his son. The accumulated weariness of all those years overflowed her like a rising tide.

“Go,” she whispered.

X

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HE went straight to Rosaria, whom he found busy with her neglected tasks, and took her exultantly in his arms.

“Sweetheart,” he said, “it is better than we thought. I shall have more to give you than we ever hoped.”

Gaspar himself was a gift which to Rosaria’s mind needed no augmenting, but she smiled at his joy and waited.

“I have to go away for a little while—only to Madrid.” He spoke in a lordly way, as if accustomed to much longer journeys. He wondered whether or not to tell her that his father was a grandee, and decided that he would rather see her surprise when she should discover it; but he could not keep the whole of the wonderful news to himself so long. “Think of it,” he rushed on, breathlessly. “I

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am to be a great man—I shall have Olivares for a friend—I shall make the destinies of nations as I make horseshoes!”

Perhaps he felt her tremble, perhaps it was the stirring of an unconscious fear in himself; but his arms tightened around her with a vehemence that hurt.

“Nothing shall ever change this,” he said, and this time it was the kiss not of a boy but of a man.

Rosaria could speak only the language of practical service. “I will get your things ready,” she said. “And José will lend you his mule if you ask him—he is out there with father now. He brought a bottle of wine for your holy day. And, Gaspar, you must not worry about your mother while you are gone. I will take care of her.”

Gaspar hesitated on the threshold with such a shamefaced sense of importance as a prince may feel on the eve of his coronation. What should he say? How could he meet them as usual, when all the world had opened so marvelously before him? To his surprise Father Esteban, who was facing the door, seemed to remark no difference in him, but to be entirely

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busied with his own thoughts. José did not see him at all—he was craning his neck toward a coach in the road, and Silvano called from the window of the smithy as he had so often called, “Work for you, my son!”

Gaspar took a quick breath as at a dash of cold water. Some casual traveler whom he, the prince in disguise, was to serve. The smith went on, cheerily: “Great work, fit for a festival. His Excellency’s mule has cast a shoe, here at our very doors.”

The dramatic value of the situation struck Gaspar, and he rose to it with a thrill. This would be his last work at the anvil, the triumphant ending of his humble days—then the disguise would be cast off and he would take his place in the great world. No need now of the journey to Madrid. Some day the Count-Duke and he would laugh together about how the great man had come to seek him out. He laughed now, a little dizzily, as he swung himself in by the smithy window, too impatient to go around by the door, and set furiously to work wielding the hammer like a Titan. Perhaps Olivares would take him into the gilded coach and bear him straight to his father.

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What miracle might not happen, on this day of all days!

"There is the girl, master," El Hermoso muttered, peering between the curtains of the coach. "She just came into the garden, and they have called her to look at our magnificence. She is a beauty—yes? Get out and speak to them—they will stand on their thick heads for joy. It would be better for me to stay here out of sight—they would know me and might be suspicious."

Olivares raised his eyebrows with an ironic smile. Who would call it a fall if the forbidden fruit grew in a royal garden? He stepped out, leaving the dwarf lurking in the shadowy depths of the coach.

"The shoe is done, your Excellency," said Silvano, coming forward, "and is nearly in place. It will take only a few minutes more. At your Excellency's service—"

There was no touch of humility in the gesture with which Silvano made the Count-Duke welcome to the little house. It was rather the manner of a king giving the freedom of his capital to the ambassador of a neighboring potentate. Olivares, always an admirer of

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spirit when it did not conflict with his own, was pleased with the quiet, spacious dignity of the man.

“I thank you, friend,” he said, graciously—and who could be so gracious when he chose?—as he passed toward the house. The arrival of Lucifer in person could hardly have stricken with more amazement the group that he approached. The rapture of José, who adored the Second King in spite of the taxes, the wonder of Rosaria, the indecipherable feelings of the priest—all expressed themselves in a petrified unanimity of silent staring. Olivares smiled inclusively, well pleased with this tribute to his grandeur.

“A cup of water, if I may trouble you so far?” he addressed Rosaria, with a glance toward the well. “The road is dusty.”

The familiar idea of refreshment stirred José’s trance to action. With a feeling that his generosity of the morning had been little short of providential, he took up the bottle he had brought.

“A cup of wine, your Excellency!” he exclaimed, eagerly. “I am José, the innkeeper, at your service; think what an advantage it

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would be for me to say that I had served your Excellency with this vintage!"

The incredible simplicity of it all was a better comedy to Olivares than he had seen on any city stage, but he was prepared to play the game only within definite limits. He had a palate whose fastidiousness he respected.

"You must pardon me, Don José," he returned, suavely. "I am fasting to-day. If I may trouble you—"

Again he spoke to Rosaria with a suggestion of command, and there was in his look at her a glint of the merchant's appreciation of choice ware. She did not know why the color flamed so hotly to her cheeks, nor why her father's voice was so harsh as he said, "Draw the water, child."

Olivares took the proffered cup with a courteous bow. "What is your name?" he asked, smiling.

Before she could answer, Silvano drew her to his side, bulwarking her with his heavy arm.

"Silvano, the smith, at your service," he answered, dryly.

Olivares narrowed his eyes reflectively. "Sil-

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vano, the smith? But I have heard that name—somewhere—”

He stood frowning, the cup of water untasted in his hand, wondering how the name of a village blacksmith came among his memories. The irrepressible José rose again to the occasion.

“I knew your Excellency could never stomach plain well-water—that is no drink for a nobleman, fast or feast. I have served noblemen, your Excellency, even here in Las Espadas. Just enough to take the chill off, now? Father Esteban here will absolve you—”

Olivares turned dilating eyes on the old priest and set down the cup so abruptly that the water splashed out on the table. “Is the work not yet done?” he asked, curtly. “I must be going.”

Silvano went to the smithy window. “Gaspar,” he called. “Gaspar, his Excellency is waiting.” He turned with an indulgent smile. “All is ready, but the boy would like to pay his respects to your Excellency.”

At the sight of the one they called Gaspar, Gaspar de Guzman stiffened and held his breath. Was this a trap? His level lids did not flicker as he looked into the blue eyes—

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they stayed fixed for a long moment, unblinking, in a way Buckingham would have recognized.

"May I have a private word with your Excellency?" asked Gaspar, valiantly.

"You are bold, my son," Silvano commented.

"I like boldness," said Olivares, turning a dark look on the smith.

At least Silvano did not know, but, instead of relief, hot anger surged up in the father that a peasant should use the name to which he had the right. He stepped back toward the coach, turning away from the little company.

"What did he call you?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"Gaspar."

"A lucky name—my own." His look swiftly probed the clear eyes, but found no trace of self-consciousness. He sighed. Then his face hardened. "You are a fine fellow and a good smith," he said, indifferently "Here is your pay." He pressed a ducat into the hard, strong hand.

Gaspar frowned, embarrassed and displeased. Olivares could see that his largess was dis-

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tasteful, and that only courtesy kept the boy from instantly refusing it. Under the cold, changeless exterior he warmed himself at the flame of a fierce joy. Proud, this young giant! Ah, he came fairly by that. Then, following the quick, involuntary lift of Gaspar's hand toward the open breast of his shirt, Olivares saw something that chilled him again. Gaspar saw that the ring arrested the Count-Duke's attention, and his eyes shone. This was his hour.

“This very day,” he began in a rapid whisper—“this very day I would have gone to you in Madrid—”

“Why?”

“My mother said that you knew my father and would take me to him.”

“Is your mother—alive?”

“Yes—but—”

“What else did she tell you?” Olivares interrupted.

“Nothing.” There was a growing anxiety in the wide, unswerving gaze of the candid eyes. Things were not going as Gaspar had expected.

Olivares's face did not alter its expression by the shifting of a feature, but Gaspar had a strange impression of the life gradually fading

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from it, as if the man were turning to stone before his eyes. It was some time before Olivares spoke, and then in a voice from which all animation had gone.

"It is fortunate that you spoke to me of this. It spares you a vain journey. Tell your mother"—he paused a breath, then went on weighing his words carefully—"the man who was your father parted company with me long ago. He is dead. Had he lived"—the words came still more slowly, as if they were wrung out by pressure—"he would have been proud of you."

He seemed to have forgotten the others, for with no further word or look he went straight to the coach. The silent little group heard the rumble of his wheels die away. José was the first to speak.

"Well, boy!" He rubbed his hands briskly. "Let us see your good fortune."

His fingers pried gently at Gaspar's clenched hand, which relaxed mechanically, showing the gold piece. José whistled. While Gaspar had stood talking with Olivares, Silvano's gaze had traveled slowly from one face to the other. He still stared at Gaspar, gnawing a forefinger

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perplexedly; then he pulled himself together, shaking his head as if to rid it of an obnoxious thought.

“Well, my son?” he asked, gruffly. “Olivares is only a man, after all.”

Gaspar did not answer. It seemed he did not even hear.

Father Esteban put the others aside and laid his hand authoritatively on the boy’s arm. “What did he tell you?” he whispered.

Gaspar looked at him. “He told me that my father is dead,” he answered, aloud, with no effort at secrecy.

Father Esteban’s face sharpened, and the brown arm showed white dents under the clutch of the delicate, veined old hand. “He told you that your father is dead? *He?*”

The priest’s agitation stirred Gaspar’s apathy to surprise. It was kind of Father Esteban to care so much, but what could he know, after all, of the real magnitude of the loss? In the first shock of the announcement Gaspar had thought only of its bearing on himself. Suddenly through his dismay pierced like a spear the remembrance of his mother.

“Mother—” he said. “She did not know—

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"I must tell her." He went in quickly, drawing the door shut behind him.

The others stood silent, Father Esteban looking with troubled eyes at the closed door. Rosaria, as in every perplexity, turned to her father, but the face she saw was one from which she shrank, frightened. It was the face of a man who wants to kill, and its eyes were fixed on the turn of the road where the coach had gone out of sight. José, utterly bewildered, spoke explosively, in puffs:

"But how should that be news to her when she has been a widow these many years?"

He bit off the words at the look that passed between the priest and Silvano. Father Esteban walked slowly to the door, hesitating with his hand on the latch. Silvano, with a harsh laugh, turned those unfamiliar and sinister eyes on the innkeeper.

"You saw them here—together—and you ask?"

"Mercy of Heaven!" ejaculated José, sitting down hard on the bench.

It came dimly to the girl that she was in the presence of a tragedy beyond mere death. It

“HE IS DEAD”

seemed that she must scream if some one did not speak.

Had she indeed cried out? No—that was the cry of a man in mortal pain, and it came from the house. Father Esteban unlatched the door and went in. Rosaria would have followed, but her father’s hand fell heavy but tender on her shoulder. She looked up at him timidly at first; but the fearful stranger was gone. This was her own dear father, but she had never seen him look so old, not even when her mother died.

“Should I not comfort him?” she asked.

“You have no comfort for this sorrow, little one,” said Silvano. Then he drew her pitifully to him as there came a sound of hasty feet, and Gaspar stood in the doorway. At the sight of his face Rosaria broke from her father’s hold and ran to him, but he drew aside with a laugh that stopped her as a blow could not have done.

“And I meant to share my inheritance with you!” he said. He rushed forward with a sudden blind impulse toward the river, but Silvano’s hand stopped him as easily as it had Rosaria.

“Where are you going, my son?” asked the smith, quietly.

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"Do you not know whose son I am?" retorted Gaspar.

Silvano's deep voice answered immediately, without a tremor: "Soledad's—as you were an hour ago."

Shaken with a convulsion of uncontrollable weakness, Gaspar held to the older man, his eyes closed to keep back the tears that he feared would come. Presently he felt a touch, and looked. José was standing with bared head, his finger signing the cross, his lips busy with inaudible prayers. Silvano and Rosaria also were praying, and beside him, with outstretched hands and a face of infinite compassion, stood Father Esteban, waiting to lead him into the room where his mother lay dead.

PART II

XI

THE STAMP OF RACE

GASPAR followed Father Esteban mechanically to the threshold of his mother's room. There he stopped, and his face hardened in an expression so like his father's that it horrified the old priest.

"Gaspar"—the boy winced at the name, and Father Esteban went on quickly—"you must forgive—"

"Forgive?" Gaspar took up the word with a sharp scorn. "What has that to do with it? I will do my duty, I will have masses said for her soul, I will myself pray for her—but I will not see her again."

"She was your mother," urged Father Esteban.

"So was he my father." Gaspar brought the words out hardily, though the effort left him livid. "I do not thank either of them for that."

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It seemed as if an iron band were tightening around his chest so that he could not breathe. Involuntarily his hands flew up to tear it away, and his fingers caught in the ribbon that he had put on with such high hopes. One jerk snapped the silk, and he left the house like a whirlwind. Rosaria ran after him to the smithy, and found him with the ring laid on the anvil, the heavy sledge lifted over his head. She snatched away the ring just as the blow began to fall. The sight of that faithful little hand in danger sobered Gaspar. It was too late to stop, almost too late to swerve the stroke, but he did his best, and, cold through and through, he flung down the hammer and sprang to see whether she was hurt.

"Don't be foolish," she said, very tenderly.

"How could you, Rosaria?" he gasped.

"How could you?"

"That belongs to her," she insisted.

"Whatever it meant to her was a lie."

"But it must have been true, once," she said. He was on his knees beside her now, and she held his dark head to her breast, soothing him as if he were a little boy and she his mother.

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So the ring was returned to Soledad's finger, where, loose as it was, it rested quietly enough now. But not even Rosaria could make Gaspar go into the room where his mother's body lay.

"That is all over for me," he said. "My mother is dead—let her rest. Your father is mine, and I thank God for him."

Among Soledad's few belongings they found her jewels, and those Gaspar gave to Father Esteban to be applied as would most benefit her soul. The old priest was rather at a loss for a means of selling them; but after some discussion José volunteered to take one of the smaller ornaments to Madrid and dispose of it to the best advantage he could. If he found himself able to drive a fair bargain, very well. More could go to the same market. If not, some other expedient could be found.

They had agreed to keep Gaspar's unhappy secret from the rest of Las Espadas, since much pain and no profit would come of publishing the truth. The old friendship between the smith and the innkeeper was the closer for this added bond, and the evening before José's journey he spent at the house by the smithy.

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In the lingering July twilight the place seemed clothed with a visible garment of peace. The poverty that was devouring Castile had made small difference to this village, where thrifty poverty was the normal condition. The smith's garden, like those of his fellows, sufficed for the needs of his family, and on the walls of the house the tiny green promise of quince and peach and nectarine came into sight as the petals fell, without a breeze, in sweet-scented white drifts. On the bench by the door Silvano sat with the priest and José. Inside Rosaria was clearing the supper-table, singing to herself as she moved leisurely to and fro. Everything spoke of well-earned rest at the end of a laborious day—everything but one. That one sound jarred on the quietness—the steady clank of hammer on anvil, beating, beating, beating.

“What is he doing?” José asked, with a frown toward the smithy. “Making a year's shoes for a stud of centipedes?”

Silvano smiled indulgently. “He is a perfect glutton for work—a born smith, if ever I saw one. That has been the saving of him since his mother died. He must always be working,

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if only to beat a bar from one shape to another just for practice—where another man might sit and brood. The best blacksmith in Spain will carry on the work at my forge when I am gone, mark that.”

“It sounds to me more like nervousness than like industry,” contradicted José, who loved an argument. “Do you really think”—he glanced toward the house and lowered his voice—“do you really think he never wishes that—things had turned out differently?”

Silvano shook his head. “No,” he said, with decision. “*He* take anything from Olivares? He is so hard that he has not yet visited his mother’s grave. And even if it were not so, what has the man to offer him? Power? They say his own is none too secure. Riches? We have enough. A smith’s trade is steady—people must always travel.”

“And yet,” José persisted, “for the son of Olivares to settle for life at a country smithy! It would be hard for the boy if he had any ambition—”

“If he had ambition!” Silvano retorted. “He has ambition—and you call it nervousness.”

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José despatched his business quickly and came back to the village in high spirits. He had met with what he considered very liberal treatment, coupled with a readiness for further dealings. In his eagerness to return with proofs of his astuteness, he had lingered neither for sight-seeing nor for gossip. His next visit to town, in September, was more eventful.

“Where did you get that trinket that you brought me before, my friend?” asked the jeweler, after the first greetings were exchanged.

José’s spine began to crawl as he remembered that on his entrance into the shop the master had despatched an errand-boy with whispered instructions. Conscious integrity was all very well in Las Espadas, where every one could vouch for it, but it would not count for much in Madrid. José’s prophetic eye saw *alguacils* at the door and a dungeon in close perspective. He thrust the Queen’s pearls back in his doublet with a twitch, but on second thoughts he produced them, after all. Better so than to have it seem that he was hiding them when he should be searched.

“A fair enough imitation,” the jeweler re-

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marked, carelessly. "Those Venice beads are quite wonderful in their way."

"Venice beads! Nothing of the kind."

"Come, come!" He winked at the innkeeper. "You are not likely to be buying real pearls. Tell me now, man to man, what you paid for these?"

"I didn't pay for them," José blurted.

"Oho!" the tradesman frowned. "So that's your kind, is it? Highway robbery, perhaps?"

"Not at all." José ardently wished he had been less accommodating. "They belonged to a lady who is now dead," he explained, with an attempt at dignified composure, "and her son wishes them sold that masses may be said for her repose."

The jeweler winked again, skeptically, then subjected the pearls to an interminable examination. Suddenly the shop door opened, and the innkeeper wheeled, palpitating, in expectation of immediate arrest. To his intense relief one of the two men that entered was an old acquaintance—gorgeous in proofs of unaccustomed prosperity, but nothing could disguise that face.

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"Oh, you know me!" cried José, delighted. "You will tell him that I am not a thief."

"No more than any innkeeper must be to make a living," said the dwarf. "Why, what is the matter here?"

"I was only amusing myself till you came," said the jeweler. "I hand him over to you. He has a cock-and-bull story, but nothing is too strange to be true. Maybe his dead lady whose son is selling her jewels is your old friend whom you think you can trace by his help."

El Hermoso shook his head. "If this is the man who sold you the brooch I thought I recognized," he said, "he is no use to me. I know him—he is from Las Espadas, and my friend was never out of Seville. I thought surely it was hers."

The dwarf sighed as if disappointed.

"Two brooches are often alike," said the jeweler.

El Hermoso nodded and turned cordially to José. "Well, and how are all my friends at Las Espadas?—Silvano and little Rosaria and Gaspar—"

"Gaspar's mother is dead." José crossed

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himself. "These jewels were hers. Gaspar gave them to the Church, and I am selling them for Father Esteban."

El Hermoso's companion—a lean, gray-haired man in black, with heavy, shell-bowed spectacles over hazel eyes—had made no impression on José, and had been a silent spectator. Now he put in a quick question.

"Las Espadas—you have lived there long?"

"All my life."

"Did you know Doña Soledad de Herrera?"

"Why—Doña Soledad—" José stammered, with a scared, involuntary glance toward the pearls in the jeweler's hand.

Quevedo made one stride, and, snatching the necklace, he examined the clasp. Then he leaned his elbows on the counter, hiding his face in his hands. The others watched him silently.

"You remember them?" asked the dwarf at last.

Quevedo nodded without lifting his face from his hands.

"Curious—to remember a thing like that when there are so many people one forgets."

Quevedo turned to them, very white and old.

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He seemed not to have heard. "She wore that the last time I saw her," he said.

"So it is you instead of myself who happen on the track of an old friend," El Hermoso remarked. "Lucky for you that I brought you here."

"It comes too late, that is all. Has she been there all these years?" Quevedo asked.

José nodded.

Quevedo shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "God forgive me for a blind fool!"

Awed and astonished as José was, he took advantage of the pause to get back to business. "But then those are real pearls, not Venice beads?"

"The Queen gave them to her, and I think would buy them again with a new clasp and no words about where they came from." He directed this hint to the jeweler, who nodded respectfully. "You said"—he turned back to José—"did you not, that she had a son? Where does he live now?"

"With Silvano, the smith," José began; but Quevedo cut him short impatiently.

"Thank you—that will do. Pablo here is too wise to try to cheat you now, so you are

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sure of a fair bargain. Remember, Pablo, you are dealing with the Church and with Quevedo—no tricks. El Hermoso, you must excuse me from visiting Don Diego's studio with you to-day. Another time. I have had no news of this lady for many years—her name means nothing to you, she was before your day—but it means many things to me, and now too much of the past is with me to make me good company for the present.”

El Hermoso, thus deprived of his companion, took José in hand and showed him the city. The innkeeper was delighted but somewhat overwhelmed by the attention, often obsequious, that was paid to his guide. El Hermoso explained, airily, “This ugly face of mine has done me a good turn at court.” Pleased and expansive as he was, José was chary of village talk, especially touching Soledad. El Hermoso got no more than had been told the jeweler, except for the one item that she had died suddenly the day following the buffoon's last visit to the village. That told the story.

Quevedo rode down to Las Espadas that afternoon and stopped at the inn. After he had supped he strolled down the road to the smithy,

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from which came the steady, persistent clink of hammer on anvil. Gaspar was there alone at work as usual. Quevedo stopped in the doorway, watching the powerful young figure that rose and bent rhythmically with the untiring regularity of an automaton.

"Good evening, friend," he said at last, as the young smith continued, unconscious of his presence.

Gaspar started. "Good evening, *caballero*. Can I serve you?" he returned, courteously, turning toward his visitor, sledge in hand.

Quevedo's weight grew heavier against the supporting door-post as he looked the young man in the face and remembered that the peasant had spoken of Soledad as Gaspar's mother.

"Are you ill?" Gaspar asked, offering the older man a seat.

"No, no." Quevedo forced a reassuring smile as he sat down. "Only a little tired. I am no longer young, I find. Please go on working—it interests me. What are you making?"

"Nothing," said Gaspar. "Only amusing myself. Practising, my father calls it—I suppose that sounds better."

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The undertone of bitterness in his laugh did not escape Quevedo. "The smith is your father?"

"The only one I ever knew." The mouth that was so like that of Olivares set a trifle more firmly.

"He must be very proud of you," said Quevedo. He was surprised and shocked by the swift distortion of rage and pain that passed over the young man's face at those words.

"I will go on, since you wish it," Gaspar muttered unevenly, catching up the bar of iron and thrusting it into the coals. He blew up the fire and the light brought into sharp relief the set, intent lines of his face. The blue eyes, even by that warm glow, had a steely hardness that had never been in Soledad's, and Quevedo sighed to see it. There too the Conqueror with the Cold Eyes had left his mark.

Gaspar began to beat the iron, and his face cleared. The blue eyes softened to a passionate longing, the lips parted in a fierce smile of desire. With such a face, Quevedo thought, his father must have wooed Soledad—small wonder that he won her! On and on he beat, in the sheer wantonness of strength. Now he

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crushed the bar flat with one tremendous blow, as one pinches a ripe grape, while the red sparks squirted out like juice. Now he tapped it round again, wielding the sledge as delicately as a jeweler's hammer. Suddenly, with a sigh, he stopped his work and stood rubbing his arms, his eyes fixed on some unseen tragedy, his mouth bitter.

"And it all ends in this." Quevedo pointed to the bar, already fading rustily back to coldness.

Gaspar had forgotten that he was not alone. At this sudden voicing of his thought he stiffened, his fingers interlaced and strained.

"But it shall not always end so," Quevedo went on, with the solemnity of a vow. "Some day it must come to more. We shall meet again—some day. The world is small."

Gaspar wiped his great hand on his leather apron and took the offered grasp with a strength that almost wrung a cry from the poet. He did not know who the stranger was—curiously enough, did not care. It sufficed that into his loneliness of misery there had come one who understood him. When he joined the others he said nothing of the stranger's visit. Nobody

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else noticed Quevedo's coming or his going with any particular interest, except when he caused a mild stir at the inn the next morning by failing to dispute the charge for his lodging.

It was not long before Quevedo found the opportunity he desired of speaking alone with Olivares. The Count-Duke made an opening for him at once by a remark upon his subdued spirits, followed by a gracious inquiry about his health.

"I am well enough, but sad, as you have seen," Quevedo answered. "I have lately heard of the death of a friend—one whom you should mourn as well as I. La Soledad."

If Olivares had expressed surprise, Quevedo's suspicions would have been alert, but he only crossed himself conventionally in silence, his face wholly expressionless. Quevedo did not try to guess what the tragedy had been—he was only sure that it had not been the woman's tragedy alone, and Olivares seemed strangely human to him.

"When did she die?" Olivares asked, in the level voice that was as impenetrable as his eyes.

"Last Ma'y, at Las Espadas—her old home,

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you know. None of us thought of looking there—it was too simple—yet there she had been all these years. Her son is the blacksmith there now.”

“Her son? Had she a son?” Olivares’s tone did not change. “You have seen him?”

“Yes. I had—a very warm friendship for his mother, and I wanted to do what I could for him. I found that I could do nothing.”

“Do you mean that he is contented in the smithy?”

“As contented as he would be with any position that I could give him. The blood that is in him must work itself out in something stronger than poetry. He has the stamp of race, your Excellency, and he has his mother’s spirit. He will be a greater man than Villa Mediana was, if the way ever opens to him. He could be a leader of armies like Don Juan of Austria—” Others were coming near them. Quevedo finished in a hasty whisper. “Think, your Excellency—would it not be truly royal justice if his Majesty could be led to show kindness to—Villa Mediana’s son?”

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XII

THE NUN OF SAN PLACIDO

IT was a bleak day in early December, but the Spanish love for a bull-fight was more than a match even for the rigor of a Castilian winter. Muffled in cloaks, the great and the little shivered in the draughty plaza while the usual slaughter of bulls, men, and horses took place for the diversion of the Danish Ambassador. It was a less lively spectacle than usual—the cold seemed to have got into the blood of the actors as well as that of the audience, and the killing and the dying were alike sluggish, unimpassioned, and uninspiring.

The interest of the audience, especially of those who were fortunate enough to be near the royal party, centered in them rather than on the arena. The King sat immovable as a wax image, his heavy eyes fixed on the spectacle in an absent, dull stare. The Queen, beside

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him, was pinched and blue with cold; but there was a strained, haggard look in her pretty face, which showed mental as well as physical discomfort. Her glances at the Count and Countess of Olivares were anything but friendly, and she sat close to her young son, Baltasar Carlos, as if a present danger threatened him. Her old hostility toward the Second King now had stronger food than the forbidden pleasures to which he tempted her husband. Let Philip wander as he chose, she had no more affection to be hurt nor respect to lose. She hated Olivares now because his despotic policy was endangering the kingdom that should be her son's, one day—and the jealousy of a wife is a mere straw-fire beside that of a mother.

This was common talk in Madrid, and now the shivering pleasure-seekers noted with relish every added proof of the strained situation. In the midst of the spectacle interest had an unexpected stimulant. There was a stir among those surrounding the royal party, and a man came into sight pushing toward Olivares—one of his own gentlemen in waiting. His face was not that of one who brings good news. He made his way to the Count-Duke, stooped, and



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PHILIP IV., KING OF SPAIN

From the painting by Velasquez in the Altman Collection

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whispered in his ear. Not a muscle of the sal-low face moved in response. He simply indicated that he had heard by an almost imper-ceptible nod, and dismissed the messenger with a slight backward motion of his hand. His attention apparently, certainly his eyes, had not swerved for an instant from the progress of affairs in the ring.

The incident had passed unnoticed by the King, but not by the Queen. It could mean only disaster—and such disaster as she dreaded for her son: the loss of either Portugal or Cata-lonia. She drew still closer to the young Prince, and her dark eyes dwelt implacably on the rigid face of the man who would at that moment have joined Soledad and Villa Mediana were hatred as deadly a weapon as an arbalist.

The bull-fight dragged interminably on, but at last it came to an end. The King, unsus-picious of catastrophe, returned to the palace glad to be housed and warm again, and sat down to chess. He was well embarked upon his game when Olivares entered. He was smil-ing confidently, but his eyes were deeper sunken than usual, and there was desperation in the gaiety of his manner.

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"I bring great news for your Majesty," he said.

"What is it?" asked the King, indifferently, his hand poised over the board.

"In one moment, sire, you have obtained riches and a dukedom."

"How so?" Philip looked up with some interest.

"Sire, the Duke of Braganza has gone mad and proclaimed himself King of Portugal, so all his possessions are forfeit to your Majesty."

Those in the room held their breath. The King sat immovable, his face expressionless, his pale eyes glazing. After a moment he lifted a pawn with a painful exertion, as if it had turned from ivory to lead, and made a knight's move with it.

"Let a remedy be found for this," he said—no more, but the chill of his tone was like the winter evening made audible. The smile faded from the face of Olivares, and, bowing silently, he left the room.

He went to his own apartments. There he sent for Don Luis, but dismissed him again after a very brief interview. A good lieutenant, yes; but the situation called for more than

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that. He sat by the hearth in a great chair, his hands clenched on the carved arms, his brooding eyes fixed on the fire. El Hermoso squatted on the floor at his feet, immovable as a gaily painted wooden figure.

"Well, master, this is a bad business," he said, suddenly; "but, after all, death is the only misfortune that is beyond mending."

"Yes—they are not done with me yet." Olivares raised his head defiantly. "If I were a young man—" He stopped, and the ring went out of his voice. "Or had money to pay troops," he added, lifelessly.

"If Don Gaspar de Guzman were young again he would not need money for troops. Men would follow him for the joy of it, as they did Don Juan of Austria." El Hermoso's eye was still following the leaping flames in the chimney, but he heard the sharp intake of Olivares's breath, and his perpetual grin widened slightly. "If you had only practised what you have preached to his Majesty, you would have a fine reserve of sons to draw on now. It is a pity you have always been so virtuous—and so short-sighted."

"Foresight along that line would have done

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me very little good," Olivares retorted, with a grim laugh. "You forget that I am not the King."

"I am excusable—all Spain forgets it, most of the time."

"Spain would remember it quickly enough if any one but a king asked our proud Castilians to receive a bastard as their equal."

"If a king could be persuaded to lead the way, a subject might follow."

Olivares moved restlessly. "The Queen would never forgive it."

The dwarf snapped his fingers. "A woman's enmity—that counts for nothing."

"I am not so sure." He sighed wearily. "Your fancy carries you too far—this grows tiresome. Remember"—he could not keep back the bitterness from his voice—"it would hardly be easy for me to persuade his Majesty to anything—at present."

"That is no joke." El Hermoso squirmed nearer to Olivares and nudged him slyly with his shoulder. "And yet I could show you a quick way back to favor. It is a dangerous way, though, even for you."

"A dangerous way?" Olivares laughed.

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“What else is open to me anywhere? Wherever I turn there is danger. What is your special peril? It can hardly frighten me.”

“You are well used to risking your body, I know—but this is another matter. Dare you risk your soul—and the King’s?”

“What do you mean?”

Olivares was holding his indifferent manner lightly now, like a mask that he was ready to drop. His glance at the jester was like the thrust of a sword. El Hermoso grinned and began to hum “The Pretty Little Nuns of San Placido,” a racy song that had been popular about the streets some ten years before, when that convent had been closed with great scandal for reasons that have nothing to do with this story. It had lately been reopened, but the name was still mentioned with a knowing leer.

“What do you mean?” Olivares repeated, leaning nearer to the dwarf and lowering his voice.

El Hermoso scrambled to his feet and brought his mouth to the level of his master’s ear. “Your old acquaintance Villanueva is patron of the convent, you know. He says one of the nuns is the most beautiful girl he has seen since

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La Soledad. His house adjoins the convent—a passage could be opened between the cellars—”

Olivares glanced over his shoulder and laid his hand on the dwarf’s mouth. “This is dangerous,” he said, slowly, “and yet—”

“Strong medicine for a sick patient,” said El Hermoso, “and your Excellency’s credit with the King is very sick just now.”

“Your treatment is kill or cure,” returned Olivares. “This would be sacrilege.”

“His Majesty has handed over so many ladies to the good Lord that it seems paltry to grudge one little courtesy in return,” said the buffoon, quizzically. “But, of course, it is dangerous, as I told you. Well, you can doubtless think of some better treatment for the case—winning back Portugal, for instance. I am a poor little parrot that knows only one story.”

“Your story is the one that is surest of catching the King’s attention,” Olivares muttered, with contempt. “He would go mad over the novelty of this, over the very danger.” His hands opened and closed nervously. “God! if the Inquisition should get wind of it!” He caught the dwarf by the shoulder and looked

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at him piercingly. "Why did you suggest it?" he asked. "Do you mean to betray me?"

The single eye returned the look steadily. "What would I gain by that? I should burn with you, you know. These years have tangled our fortunes too tightly to be picked apart in a moment. Why do you distrust me?"

The unemotional, matter-of-fact tone steadied Olivares. He rubbed his forehead, sighing. "My nerves play me tricks—I sleep so little lately. No, you would be true to me, of course—for your own interest, if for no other reason."

"Believe me or not, as you choose," retorted the dwarf, with unexpected intensity, "but my own interest has no part in my service of you. I have other reasons."

Olivares laughed shortly and laid his hand for a moment on the deformed shoulder. "I am almost as old and broken as my enemies like to think," he said, "when it touches me to have a fool tell me he loves me. I am a very lonely man, El Hermoso. Well, you shall not lack your reward."

The dwarf made no answer, only stared into the fire.

"All the same," Olivares added, "I will admit

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that I am a little afraid—superstition, if you like—of your suggestions along this line.”

“Why, I never made but one other—the little peasant that you said was too dark for beauty. It came to nothing—how did that bring you bad luck?”

“It brought me bad dreams,” said Olivares, grimly. “But—dreams are only dreams, bad or good. You may tell Villanueva to come here to me. I will talk with him.”

The case was extreme enough to demand extreme treatment, as El Hermoso had said. Olivares had no alternative but a choice of dangers. It seemed that he had chosen wisely, for at the first suggestion of the matter the King began to thaw. After one surreptitious interview with the beautiful nun—even with a grating between—the loss of Portugal was apparently not only forgiven but forgotten, and the old confidence completely re-established.

Olivares, listening to Philip’s raptures, smiled with weary scorn. “So she did not understand at first,” he murmured. “What innocence!”

Philip frowned, and his heavy lip quivered. Then he laughed cynically. “I have not seen its like since—La Soledad.” Olivares stiffened

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—he had thought she was forgotten. Philip went on: “What a young fool I was then! But I know better now, thanks to her. She taught me how much innocence is worth—that women are made for men, not for art or for God, and that if one leaves the rose on the bush another man will pick it.”

“I take it that your Majesty explained your meaning fully, this time,” said Olivares.

“As fully as I could, under the circumstances. Oh, she was more beautiful than ever when she began to cry—again like La Soledad. She is afraid—afraid to say yes, afraid to say no—but she promised me an answer to-morrow night. I would not go till she did.”

The answer when it came was no—and that Philip would not accept. Night after night the same scene was repeated. One day Olivares heard some one singing “The Pretty Little Nuns of San Placido” along the corridor of the palace. It was one of the courtiers, and when he caught sight of the Count-Duke the song broke off with a snap. For a second even Olivares’s steady, relentless heart seemed to stop. So the thing had leaked out—he might have known it could not be kept wholly hid-

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den. Already, no doubt, it was being whispered along the Liars' Walk. Next would come a secret inquiry by the Holy Office, and next—he stopped his thoughts there, peremptorily. The whole affair must be over before that, a closed chapter, something completely in the past, to be forgotten or lied away. Olivares knew enough of Philip to realize that now he would continue the chase till he had caught his game. After that he might listen to reason, not before. Olivares himself reinforced the King's entreaties, and, under the combined pressure of the one's desire and the other's mortal terror, the nun's resistance gave way. Work was immediately begun upon a passage between the cellars of the two buildings—and one night the King passed through.

“Damn these women and their scruples!” Villanueva whispered to Olivares, as they proceeded cautiously through the darkness. “The girl's conscience was too much for her, and she told the Abbess. I had my own troubles to-day, you may believe. The good lady saw enough of the Holy Office ten years ago to last her the rest of her life, but I succeeded in hushing her at last. I shall be glad

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when the business is well over, though. The air about here smells too much of dungeons and burning to be really comfortable breathing."

Olivares silenced him impatiently. The thought was clear enough in his own mind to make it unpleasant to have it worded.

"Is that the room, where I can see the light?" asked Philip, breathlessly. The novelty of the adventure had brought back his youth.

"Yes, your Majesty," Olivares murmured. "A moment—let me make sure—"

But Philip had run forward eagerly and thrown open the door. The ardent greeting that he had begun trailed off into silence, and he stood ghastly in the candle-light that shone from the room, staring through the open door.

"Is she not there?" Olivares cried, sharply. Then he, too, was silent.

The beautiful nun was there. She lay in a coffin before them, her long lashes unnaturally dark against her white cheeks, her hands folded on a crucifix. Candles burned at her head and feet, and the tall, dark figure of the Abbess stood behind the bier, confronting the men in the doorway with a face as pale and composed as the girl's. All at once the King turned and

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ran stumblingly back by the way he had come sobbing incoherent prayers. Villanueva and Olivares followed, white and shaken.

When Olivares opened the King's curtains the next morning, Philip was awake and turned to him eagerly.

"Thank God you have come!" he cried. "I have been so long alone!"

"Your Majesty has not slept?"

"No!" Philip shuddered. "I dared not go to sleep—I was afraid of dreaming. But no dreams could have been worse than my thoughts were. How pure she looked! Did Soledad look like that in her coffin, I wonder?" The King broke off and hid his face on his arm. "Sleep—could you sleep last night?"

Olivares sighed. Last night for him had been no worse than so many others. His face settled in deeper lines of weariness as he answered, "No, your Majesty."

Philip was too fully occupied with his own distress to hear him. The question had been prompted less by sympathy than by a desire for companionship in misery. He went on with a torrent of self-reproach.

"I am the chief of sinners!" he sobbed, wal-

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lowing in penitence. "Anathema—accursed! What atonement can I ever make?"

"Atonement!" Olivares interrupted, his eyes suddenly piercing. "Sire, do you mean that, or are those only words, like so many that I have heard you speak?"

A blow in the face could have no more effectually surprised Philip to silence. He stared with wide eyes at the man who dared to speak in that tone to the King of Spain.

"God knows, I have never blamed your Majesty by a thought for what you call sin," said Olivares. "The flesh is weak, and it is not for me to judge—I, too, have known what it is to forget conscience in a woman's arms. It is this perpetual barren repentance which seems to me a childish thing, unworthy of you. You are too great a man, too strong—even what you call weakness is only strength misused—to waste yourself in words and tears. You spoke of atonement—now is your time to atone, if you really mean that."

"But how can I—for this wrong?" Olivares's tone of authority had worked well—the old habit of reverent obedience had resumed its sway over the bewildered King, and he

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looked up to the stern, dark face as to a prophet.

"There are other wrongs, well within your reach," Olivares said. "You have a son at Ocana—a beautiful boy, fit to be a prince. Will you do a father's duty by him, or shall he waste his life in obscurity while you sin and repent and talk about your soul?"

"These are bold words," said Philip, slowly.

"I am not used to being cowardly in your service, sire."

Philip's long, thin fingers plaited the coverlet for a while. At last he spoke. "The Queen will be displeased."

"I took that into account, sire, when I spoke. Her Majesty has little kindness for me already, and will have still less after this—but my duty to my King comes before everything else."

Philip still hesitated, then he looked up with sudden hopefulness. "You said—that you, too, had known—"

"I, too, have a son who is nameless," said Olivares, slowly, "but unfortunately my case is not like your Majesty's. I am not a king who hallows what he touches—whose word can make his son a prince. If I tried to make our

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proud Castilians accept my son it would be agony for me and bitter shame for him.”

“Not with the King’s countenance!” Philip exclaimed. “We will—is he old enough to marry?”

“He is a man,” Olivares answered, holding himself rigidly quiet.

“Then that is simple. We will make a great marriage for him—the daughter of the Duke of Frias—why not? An alliance with the Constable of Spain and our own favor—his standing would be fully assured. Oh, my friend, you have shown me the way of righteousness. Walk it with me.”

The dim, sumptuous room swam before Olivares’s eyes, and he moistened his lips before he spoke. This realization of his hopes was almost terrifying.

“Your Majesty,” he said, kneeling by the bed and raising the King’s hand to his lips, “I ask nothing better.”

“What title shall I give my son?” Philip asked.

“Why not call him Don Juan of Austria?” Olivares suggested. “That is a name of good omen and would please the popular sentiment.”

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"Don Juan of Austria!" Philip's eyes kindled and he pressed Olivares's hand. "There is a sound of victory in it."

"Why not a second Lepanto in Portugal or Catalonia?"

Gloom settled on the King, and he drew his hand from that of his minister. "There is need," he said. "But he is so young—only twelve. And the harm has been done—"

"Perhaps my son may serve to conquer the rebels—"

"There is need," Philip reiterated, heavily, frowning.

"The loss of those kingdoms is a misfortune of which I dare not think or I would lose my mind," said Olivares, with deep sadness; then he paused for Philip's reassurance. It did not come. The King was silent, his frown darkening. A gray tinge crept into Olivares's usual pallor.

"Your Majesty does not doubt the reasons I have given you for the loss of Portugal? Do you think I am in any way to blame for the Duchess of Mantua's misgovernment?" he asked, hoarsely.

Philip shook his head with a weary sigh.

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“If I doubted your truthfulness, Don Gaspar, some one else would be opening my curtains. Instead of talking about unpleasant things, let us plan the festivals for Don Juan of Austria.”

XIII

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NIGHT after night, in the house by the smithy, Gaspar would breathe deeply and tranquilly till he was sure his wife was safely asleep. His misery was not a thing he would share. Then, as he lay awake, to escape the thoughts that tormented him he would follow the path beside the river that he could hear muttering to itself in the stillness. There was one place that he could never pass in these imaginary journeys. He stopped always at the eddy just before one came to the graveyard. There leaves and chips sailed around and around, trying vainly to get back into the current that had flung them there—the current that was always beyond their reach, and yet so near that the noise and stir of its passing kept them always restless. There he saw himself, given the dreams of a conqueror and flung into

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a country smithy, condemned to take his place among the defeated without a chance to prove himself in the battle. He would stand in fancy holding to a tree on the bank, staring down at the swirling brown water till at last he grew dizzy, his hold on the tree loosened, and he slipped down, down—into the heavy sleep of exhaustion.

Of all this Rosaria knew nothing. Gaspar, the smith, her husband, was all of him that she understood. His industry and his love were his life to her, and she thought that he was happy. If she ever remembered her father's words, "You have no comfort for this sorrow, little one," it was in thankfulness that they had proved untrue. Only one thing troubled her—that Gaspar even now would not visit his mother's grave. That she ascribed, in her own mind, to habit and obstinacy rather than to any rankling bitterness. It was Rosaria's tendency unquestioningly to take the woman's side, and her sympathy was with Soledad. She spent more time and prayers beside that grave than she did by her own mother's, as if she were trying to atone for Gaspar's neglect. One summer evening she had knelt long. She had

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been warned repeatedly concerning the dangers of the river-path in the dark, so she took the longer and safer way home. Her heart was full of happy complacency as she came in sight of her shining windows, and she quickened her pace as she saw Gaspar standing alone, his figure large and dark in the warm oblong of the doorway. She was about to call to him when another voice forestalled her.

“Gaspar.”

The young man stopped short on the threshold. He did not turn, but his outline grew rigid. Rosaria, hidden in the dusk, stood as still.

“Gaspar, my son.”

The man who spoke stood in the lamplight now. He was richly dressed as for the King's company, but it was the man himself who overpowered by his commanding magnificence. His gray hair and beard gave his hard face an austere beauty, and his eyes glittered darker and more brilliant than in his youth. Gaspar slowly turned and confronted him. Outlined against the light, the young man stood unbending and repellent, as if fashioned from his own iron.

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"Has your Excellency's mule again cast a shoe?" he asked.

"So hard!" the wonderful voice murmured. "It is not strange—and yet . . . did your mother teach you that?" The question flashed suddenly out like a rapier, but there was no responsive quiver of the iron figure.

"All that my mother taught me I have had to forget."

"What did she teach you?"

"To honor my father."

There was a pause.

"You strike hard, my son," the Count-Duke said at last, very low.

Gaspar's reply was slow and uncadenced. The words fell one by one like blows of a sledge. "The man who was my father parted company with you long ago. Had he lived he might have been proud of me."

Olivares flinched and caught his lip between his teeth. When he spoke his voice was harsh and broken. "I—I had not expected this. I looked for a human heart in Soledad's child."

Gaspar leaped forward. "Let her name alone!" he commanded, breathlessly. "You have shamed her enough."

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The iron was melted. Olivares's eyes gleamed with a foretaste of triumph, then the dark lids veiled them again.

"Shame her?" His voice vibrated with noble indignation. "Shame her? I could not. That was left for her son to do."

Gaspar caught his arm with a hand that burned through the velvet sleeve. "Stop!" he panted. "I do not understand."

Olivares looked at him with melancholy scorn. "You need hardly tell me that."

"What do you mean?" Gaspar insisted.

Olivares shook his head with tragic finality. "You could not understand," he said, quietly. "How should I expect it? She stood above law, my son, and that is a height you have never known." He turned the young man toward the light and scrutinized the strained, imploring face. "Through my own fault—the soul is there." Olivares's breath caught like a sob. "My fault, not yours, that we do not speak the same language. Words cannot mean to you what they mean to me—how can we understand each other? I left you here in the cage of the little village—what could you learn of the world where you belong?" He raised

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one clenched hand to his forehead, then let it fall heavily to his side again. "To know that you thought of her as if she had been a light woman!" He bowed his head as in utter humiliation. "You are a strong man and a cruel one," he went on, in a strangled voice. "I have wronged you more bitterly than you can realize—yet you may be content with your vengeance. Enjoy it to the full, and when you hear men speak of the pride of Olivares, remember that you have seen that pride in the dust—and that it was you who laid it there."

He turned as if to go. Gaspar still held him.

"Tell me the truth about my mother," he entreated. "It is my right."

"You could not understand. My cowardice has robbed you of that right with all the rest. Let me go."

"Why did you come?" Gaspar demanded, passionately.

"I did not know it was too late—" Again Gaspar saw the gleam of the strong teeth as they caught the bearded lip. "I came to give you all your rights, my son—all."

"What do you mean?" Gaspar whispered.

Olivares leaned toward him, searching his

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face. "Will you hear me?" He spoke as eagerly as his son. "Is it still possible?"

Gaspar's grip of his father's arm relaxed, and with a motion of bewildered submission he sank heavily on the bench by the door. Olivares stood before him for a moment. Gaspar looked up at the regal figure, then with a wave of hot embarrassment he sprang to his feet and awkwardly motioned the older man to a seat. The Count-Duke took it with an evident weariness that did not lose dignity.

"I thank you," he said. Then, "You are the master—here."

Taking off his wide hat, he leaned his gray head back against the wall, so that the lamp-light fell on his face, emphasizing its deep lines, its heavy shadows. Gaspar's throat contracted with a spasm of pity—for this man?

"Let us talk calmly," Olivares murmured, his eyes closed. "Calmly—this moment has left me broken as no other moment of my life—but one." He sighed. Then he opened his eyes and scanned the stormy young face beside him with profound satisfaction. All Guzman—almost. And nothing to arouse the King's suspicion—so many women have blue eyes. "How

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did you think of me before you met and hated me?" he asked.

Gaspar was silent. He could not have told this man—now—all the dreams of which his name had been the symbol. Olivares guessed nearly enough why he did not answer.

"Let that pass," he said, quickly. "What did they say of me here in the village?"

"That you were strong—"

Olivares dismissed the obvious estimate with a sneer. "I know—the strongest man in Spain, and so forth. And they said I was wicked, did they not?"

"Yes."

Olivares turned his face full upon Gaspar. "Who said I was unhappy?"

Gaspar, astonished, met his look, and Olivares's eyes held him as long ago they had held Soledad. They seemed the eyes of a lost angel who looks back on heaven—proud, hopeless, infinitely sad.

"Unhappy?" he faltered.

"Ah!" said Olivares. "There is never one who thinks of that."

Gaspar still looked into his father's eyes, seeing there what the other willed he should see.

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His chest heaved like that of a spent runner.

"Yes, I can see it. You are—unhappy—"

Olivares lowered his lids, and Gaspar took a long breath. "You are less a child than I thought, my son," said the Count-Duke, gently. "I had not dared to hope that you would see so much. And you wonder, perhaps, why I am unhappy. I have made power my god, and I am the master of Spain. Why should I not be content?"

"You are—lonely—" The words came painfully.

Olivares drew a hand across his brow. He felt that victory was imminent, but even on him the strain was beginning to tell.

"More than that—I am alone. Every hope that other men hold precious I have sacrificed to the one thing I worship. Power—power—power! Think, boy—think what it means to mold men as you mold the hot iron, to beat kingdoms to what shape you will—"

"How did you know my dreams?" Gaspar cried.

Olivares smiled proudly. "How else could it be with our son? She loved power as well as I. How she could sway an audience! My

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son, in the moment when first our eyes met I knew that this of all the world was my mate—my mate, whom I could never hear men call . . . my wife.”

Gaspar winced. It was a moment before his father went on.

“I was married—to a woman who loved me as little as I did her. There was never the pretense of it between us. We were comrades in the quest for power, and we pursued it by ignoble ways—well, you must have heard all that. There are always plenty who make it their business to tell such things. But my ambitions grew—grew to dreams for the glory of Spain that meant nothing to my wife. Then—I met your mother.”

He came abruptly to a pause, bowing his head in his hands. There was a long silence. Gaspar could hear the loud thudding of his own heart. When Olivares spoke again it was as one speaks in sleep, measured, monotonous words like drops of blood from a wound.

“I can see her face now, as she stooped to me that day in the gardens at Aranjuez. No priestess ever came to the altar more sacredly than she to my arms. I was more than man

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in the moment that realized my dream of one who should walk triumphant and clean where I had fought my way up in the mire—one whom I should hold up to pluck the very stars from heaven—my dream of you, my son.”

“Father—”

The tone had not the fullness of surrender that Olivares desired. He went on, his hand closing harshly on Gaspar’s wrist.

“Do not call me that till you have heard the end. You spoke truly of shame, but it is mine, all mine. You wonder why she left me? Why I denied you? I do not know whether you can understand—one must have loved as a man loves to know what parted us. The bond between us had to be nobler than the laws of men, or baser. Well, I was only a man—and she would have had me a god. I do not blame her for leaving me—but all the best of me went with her. I had not even the courage left to claim you as my heir before the world—you, for whom I had dreamed such great things, who were to build with clean hands upon my foundations a house of life the like of which this mean world never conceived. Well—I am judged.”

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“I do not judge you.”

“I judge myself—and condemn myself beyond pardon. God! if I had only dared to say that day: ‘My son, here are fame and wealth and power. I have bought them with my very soul—see, they are yours. You have only to stretch out your hand and accept them, as the King accepts, with a touch. In you our name shall attain its height—in you, Gaspar de Guzman, my son.’ There was my opportunity—now it lies in her grave—the mound where you kneel holds both her body and my soul.”

“I have never seen her grave,” said Gaspar.

So his pride went as deep as that! Guzman to the marrow! Olivares could have caught him in his arms, but he controlled himself to apparent dejection.

“So hard to her? Then what can I look for? I have done that which neither you nor she can forgive—denied you to your face. Since that moment I have not known peace.”

“Nor have I.”

“Nothing would have been impossible to us—on what heights of power might we not have planted the banner of Spain, you and I! And

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your children—I have wronged and robbed them—all the unborn who stand listening at the doors of fate. No—now that I realize all that you are, I dare no longer dream of your forgiveness.”

“Why do we speak any more of forgiveness?” said Gaspar, steadily. “My mother never used that word. When I had done wrong, she never said, ‘I forgive.’ She said, ‘I understand.’”

Olivares flashed a keen look at his son. Who knew better than he what reserves and double meanings might be cloaked by open-seeming words. Yet, how straightforwardly the boy’s eyes met his!

“Give me your meaning plainly,” he commanded.

“Father, I understand,” said Gaspar, holding out his hand.

All was won—already in imagination Olivares saw Portugal and Catalonia recovered, the prizes of this vivid young spirit whom the great Don Juan of Austria himself had not excelled in beauty and magnanimity. He foresaw Gaspar a popular idol, a brilliant shield behind which he could work out his ambitions

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unmolested. The world reeled about him in a storm of fresh hope and confidence. He caught Gaspar's hands in his with the ardor of one who lays hold on new life.

"I have dreamed of this hour so often—so often! But I always woke before I was sure of you."

"I had not thought that you could need me—" Gaspar began, with reverent wonder.

Olivares laughed out exultantly. "We need each other, my son, you and I. It is as if your blood ran in my own veins—your youth makes me young again. Everything opens so clear before me now! How strong they are, these hands of yours—you shall hew out in Portugal another Lepanto—together we will sweep away rebellion like a tempest—we will dye all the world with the sunrise colors of Spain, you and I."

Gaspar flamed to his rapture, dazzled by the vistas he opened. Here spoke indeed the voice of his dreams, and he had not realized how intoxicating its music could be.

"Come—Gaspar de Guzman!"

Gaspar's answering cry of joy was almost a sob. "Oh, if you knew! If you knew! I

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had not thought that a name could mean so much!"

"And you shall bear it unchallenged, my son. I have prepared everything for you. The King stands ready to show you every favor, and with the Constable of Spain behind you as well as Olivares—"

"The Constable of Spain! What friends you have!"

"Frias, my friend!" There was a cruel edge to the harsh, curt laugh. "No—I have no friends, my son. But he fears me, and he obeys the King—therefore he is to be your father-in-law."

"But, father," Gaspar struck in, quickly, "I thought you knew. I already have a wife."

"The marriage can be annulled."

"Impossible." Gaspar recoiled, detaching his hands from his father's grasp.

"I do not know that word."

"Learn it now."

The two sentences might have been spoken by the same person, so alike were the two voices. Olivares with an effort controlled his displeasure. That echo of his own inexorable

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will warned him that this was a time to persuade, not to overbear. When he spoke again, it was with pathos.

"My son, I had forgotten. Marriage has a different meaning in the palace and in the smithy. Let us understand each other. Marriage with you means love, is it not so?"

"What else?" Gaspar was again on his guard.

Olivares struck past it. "Such love as consecrated your life from its first moment."

A quick breath from Gaspar betrayed how true the thrust had gone. Olivares pressed his advantage.

"In our world—*our* world, my son—marriage is, as I have told you, an alliance of powers—a working partnership, if you prefer. We marry as we must. We love—as your mother and I did."

"But you knew what you were doing, you and my mother," Gaspar protested. "You are asking me to desert the woman who trusts me—"

Olivares was tense with impatience, but he held himself in hand and answered calmly, with a caressing turn of the voice as subtle

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as the glide of a serpent, "Why need you desert her?"

"But you said—" Gaspar blurted, puzzled.

"Think well what I said." There was another pause, then Olivares continued, slowly, that each word might carry its full value: "It is a question of changing not facts, but mere names. Is your mother less to be honored because she lacked the name of wife?"

The silence prolonged itself. This time it was the older man who could hear the beating of his heart. At last Gaspar rose. Olivares sprang to his feet and confronted his son, searching feverishly for some trace of feeling in the set face. This was indeed the heir of Gaspar de Guzman—never had Buckingham searched the Count-Duke's baffling mask more vainly. Then the young man spoke with a quiet finality:

"Twice I have lost a father."

"What do you mean?" Olivares's voice cracked. "This is childishness—"

"And you told me to build my house of life with clean hands — *you!*" His scorn seared.

"Childishness, I say!" panted Olivares. Such

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strength—such magnificent pride! Was all to be lost now, and for a mere folly? His hand, shaking, plucked at the fastenings of his high collar. He saw her come forward into the light behind Gaspar, and made one last desperate plea. “Your wife herself, if she truly loves you, will not hold you back from greatness!”

“Greatness?” said Gaspar.

Rosaria laid her hand on her husband’s arm. He turned with a start.

“I heard everything,” she said, evenly, almost dully.

His arm went around her with a protecting vehemence that was harsh in its strength. She submitted passively.

“This is what belongs to you,” she insisted. “You wanted it all the time in your heart. I thought you were happy—and you were miserable all the time, longing for this. You must go with him.”

“And leave you?”

“Yes.” She did not quiver even then. She had writhed on the dewy ground in the shadow while her world crashed down in ruin around her, her teeth closed on her soft arm lest she should cry aloud. Now she had come out on

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the listless other side of agony. Something of this—not all—Gaspar divined, and he held her close to him with the low, broken laugh that serves some men instead of tears. At least she had not understood that last insult. If she had, he could have struck his father dead before her.

“Madness—madness, little child!” he whispered against her hair.

“Was your mother mad, then?” Olivares demanded.

Gaspar looked at him from level, unblinking lids. “She is dead.”

“She died because her hope for you died,” said Rosaria, with the same weary steadiness. “You are killing her again if you refuse. Gaspar, for her sake, you must go. You would never know peace again, nor could I—”

“There is nothing more to say about this,” he interposed, with an authority that silenced her. “My mother lived her life as she chose—I have the same right. Is your Excellency not yet answered?”

A tempest of warring desires blinded Olivares—desire to strike Gaspar down and stamp the beauty from that grave, scornful face with

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his spurred heel—desire to take his son in an embrace that should defy the world, to keep him at whatever cost.

“Fool!” said Olivares.

He was gone.

PART III



XIV

THE HEIR OF OLIVARES

EL HERMOSO waited with three horses on the outskirts of the village. He had tied the bridles to a tree and sat by the roadside, his long arms clasped about his stubby knees, his face hidden. When he heard approaching steps he scrambled up alertly, listening as he untied the horses. It was one man only who was striding so violently along the road. Alone—did that mean only delay, or that Gaspar had torn himself free from his father, and that Olivares alone was to pay for Villa Mediana's murder?

In a moment the Count-Duke appeared. He did not speak, but caught his reins roughly from the dwarf and swung himself to the saddle. El Hermoso went up the side of his own mount like a monkey.

“Is the other coming, master?” he asked.

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Olivares, at the question, lifted his heavy riding-whip, turned in the saddle, and slashed full at the buffoon's face. El Hermoso ducked, but not quickly enough. The whip glanced from his forehead with a force that would have sent a person with a thinner skull or a weaker grip rolling to the ground. Olivares did not wait to see the effect of the blow—indeed, he did not seem conscious of having struck it. Bending forward, he set spurs to his horse and galloped furiously along the road to Loeches. El Hermoso, encumbered with the extra mount, followed more slowly. The lash had cut, and he had no free hand to wipe away the thin stream of blood that ran down over the drawn, empty eye-socket to the corner of the scarred mouth. At the taste of it he shuddered, remembering the time, once before, when blood, not his own, had been upon his lips. He lay forward on his horse's neck, whimpering like a dog, while the animals cantered on at their own will.

When he reached Loeches he found Olivares waiting at a short distance from the gates. The sight of the house, its windows still warmly lighted, had made him remember that his

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coming back must seem as casual as his going, and that El Hermoso must return the extra horse to the stall unnoticed, as he had taken it. Olivares waited while this was done, then they rode toward the house. As they dismounted in the courtyard Olivares, for the first time, observed the dwarf's face. He stared in unfeigned amazement.

"What struck you?" he asked, as they went into the house. "An overhanging branch?"

El Hermoso grinned and lifted the wet lash of Olivares's whip with a quizzical finger. The lines deepened in the Count-Duke's face.

"Did I do it?" he asked, slowly, with a note of fear in his voice. "I did not know—I had forgotten, I should say. Poor dog—you caught the blow that was meant for some one else."

"My betters have done that before me," said El Hermoso.

Olivares did not go to bed that night. Though his whole body ached with fatigue, and the blood throbbed behind his eyes like the hammers of a smithy, he could not have forced himself to lie down. Back and forth in the gloomy solitude of his room he went, reviewing word by word the scene of the evening. He

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could remember every gesture of the boy, every expression of his face. How like Soledad's those eyes had been at the moment of the father's victory, when all the eager young heart lay in the hollow of his hand! It was the look that he had seen in the gardens at Aranjuez; but it stirred him to a passion of covetous longing that he had never known for Soledad. And he had lost the prize that he had taken—lost it beyond recovery, he knew, for if he recognized Soledad's look, he also knew the look that had come afterward—his own.

Well, let it be so. Let the young fool stay in the smithy, if that was his choice. Let him boast to his peasant cronies that he had shown the door to Olivares— God! if he should do that! Blind rage swept over the man again, and with it a sickness of dread. The story would be only too readily believed—and a laugh would ruin him. Who need fear Olivares any longer if a country blacksmith thought his favor not worth taking? And the King—what would he say to the King?

The darkness seemed to press in upon him from four sides like the walls of a trap. He could hear the hiss of his own heavy breathing

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like the panting of fate at his heels. A freak of memory stabbed his mind with the closing words of Quevedo's "Medea":

For thee, behold, death draweth on
Evil and lonely, like thine heart. The hands
Of thine old Argo, rotting where she stands,
Shall smite thine head in twain—and bitter be
To the last end thy memories of me.

"Damn her!" he said, aloud. "I wish I had killed her that night!"

He could not believe that so slight a thing—a mere incident—could so lay hold upon his life. He had left it far behind, and now it hampered his feet at every step. It had even caught at his self-control—a thing of which he had always been as sure as he was of the earth under his feet. He remembered the dwarf's bleeding face, and shivered. He had not known that he struck—and the realization of it gave him a nausea of helplessness, as if an earthquake had heaved the floor where he stood.

Action! He pulled himself fiercely together. Action was the only cure for this epilepsy of the will. He would tear himself free of this vampire at whatever cost— Suddenly he resumed

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his long, swinging stride, his head up, his face savagely intense in the darkness.

Before he was powerful enough to do as he chose, not as custom dictated, Olivares had lived like other young men of his rank. Their amusements had never appealed to him, but he had gone through the routine of dissipation with a cold, deliberate disdain, as one performs an irksome but necessary business. As soon as he could afford to indulge his own tastes, he had dropped these pursuits for the more congenial pleasures of ambition. They were the more easily left behind because they had all been of the variety that can be paid for—and it was of no consequence to him that one of the boys who played in the streets of Seville was more or less Guzman. The affair had been settled on a cash basis and forgotten; but now Olivares remembered. That boy, if he still lived, must be well grown—nearly thirty. The plans that had been made would fit one young man as well as another, and Gaspar—Olivares laughed aloud with vindictive relish. That would be a thorn in those hard blue eyes. The boy would hardly feel like boasting when he found that he had been so easily fooled—that

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Olivares had other sons—that his mother had been merely one of the great man's mistresses.

The Count-Duke had no fear that his offer would be refused a second time.

"There are not two such fools in the world," he thought, bitterly, and hated Gaspar the more for the pain of longing that ran through him at the thought.

Business had called Quevedo from Madrid early in the summer. He grumbled at taking so long a journey, even to receive a substantial legacy from a relative whose existence he had so nearly forgotten that it seemed like finding the money. The state of the country through which he traveled did not make for cheerfulness. Poverty and discontent choked the traveler's way like weeds. His destination was near the Portuguese frontier, and there he heard many details of the causes of the revolution which the vigilance of Olivares had not permitted to reach Madrid. In spite of his new riches, he made the journey home with a furrowed forehead and a puckered mouth. He had never posed as a patriot, but he loved his country enough to be angry when he saw her

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duped. His fingers fidgeted for a pen—if he should tell what he had heard as only Quevedo could tell it! Then he relaxed with a sigh. The ruin of Gaspar's father would be the end of all hope for Gaspar, and Quevedo, remembering that hour in the smithy, lacked the heart to condemn Soledad's son to a lifelong bitterness. He was still uneasy and irresolute when he reached Madrid; but the first news that greeted him there arrayed him at once on the Count-Duke's side.

It was autumn, one of those close, damp days when it is more agreeable out of doors than in, and the gardens of Buen Retiro were popular. When Quevedo had paid his homage to the King, he settled himself comfortably on a carved marble bench, among a group of gossips. They were decidedly disappointed at his reception of their news.

"So his Excellency has found an heir of his own blood?" he repeated. "Well, why do you find fault with him for doing a good deed? God knows he needs an entry on the credit side of the book." He shook his head darkly, remembering all he had seen and heard. "He may have made mistakes in government—"

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"May have made mistakes!" The jeering echo was general, though discreetly subdued.

"Has made them, then, if that suits you better. He is one of ourselves, after all—his faults show up larger because he is a greater man; but they are our faults and the faults of all our countrymen. It is as unfair for Spain to blame him for all that is wrong with Spain as it is for a fading coquette to blame her mirror for what she sees in it. But let that pass—when the mischief is done it makes little difference whose fault it is. At least it is a comfort to know that he has it in him to do an act of personal justice, whatever his public conscience may be."

"Personal justice? Get an opinion on that point from Don Luis."

"Yes—" Quevedo nodded slowly. "That is a pity, I admit. But, after all, Don Luis has only one claim, and the son has two—his own and . . . his mother's." He flushed at the laughter and the comments that met this remark. "Why do you speak of her in that tone?" he asked, quietly. "Do you know who she was?"

"Not the kind of woman to spend chivalrous scruples on. One can see that well enough by

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the young fellow. He must be her image, for there is little enough Guzman about him, as far as one can see."

Quevedo peered at them through his spectacles with a puzzled narrowing of the eyes. "Then he seems unworthy of the name to you?"

"Wait till you see him, and judge for yourself. You must remember to call him Excellency—we all have to do that. It chokes the old nobles, and no wonder. Olivares has gone too far this time."

"Too far?" retorted another, with a shrug. "They will stand anything. Don Enrique Felipe de Guzman is to be Frias's son-in-law—can you go ahead of that?"

"Poor girl! Have they succeeded in annulling his former marriage, then?"

The former speaker slapped his pocket. "Anything can be bought in these days by a man who has the money."

"He was married?" Quevedo asked. "That is a pity. I never thought of that—he is so young."

"Young?"

"Yes," Quevedo went on, quickly, "only a lad. Surely some one told me so."

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“He will never see the twenties again.”

Quevedo glanced from one to the other uneasily. He felt a little cold, and drew his cloak about him.

“You said there was not much Guzman about him—at least he looks like his father?”

“Don Enrique Felipe? He looks as much like Olivares as a street-cat looks like a lion.”

“Somewhat like him around the eyes, perhaps,” suggested one of the group.

“Pooh! both dark, that is all. The young fellow has a shifty—”

“Change your subject! Change your subject!” broke in another. “Here comes Don Luis.”

Quevedo had half risen from his seat, but he sank back. “As for the seeming older, the court dress may make a difference,” he reflected. “And perhaps his eyes may look dark in certain lights—hers did, I remember. But shifty—” He roused himself to return Don Luis’s salutation, and moved over to make a place on the garden-seat.

“I can only stay a moment,” Don Luis ex-

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cused himself, courteously. "Her Majesty has sent for me."

"Her Majesty!" Quevedo repeated, startled.

In view of the Queen's known hostility to Olivares, this was significant. Don Luis had evidently lost no time. Meaning glances were exchanged throughout the group, glances that Don Luis ignored with a composure worthy of the Count-Duke's training.

"Her Majesty has been gracious enough to ask my opinion of some recent plays," he said, and turned the talk to Quevedo's journey, asking polite questions that were answered more or less at random.

Suddenly Don Luis looked quickly at the bench where the older man sat, then frowned and stepped back, catching Quevedo by the arm and jerking him away from the garden-seat.

"This begins to be tiresome," he said, with a cold precision ludicrously at variance with the speed and vigor of his movement. "Pardon my roughness, Don Francisco—but, you see."

Quevedo, bewildered, followed the gesture and saw that the seat was now being sluiced with a cascade of water that spouted from the

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carved flowers of the back. He laughed—to laugh at a joke on himself was part of his code.

“You may turn off the water, your Excellency.” Don Luis raised his voice with a faintly mocking stress on the title. “We are all out of range, and it is a pity to waste it.”

The stream stopped as he spoke, and a young man swaggered out from the shrubbery. He was very brilliantly dressed, and the rich clothing emphasized so lamentably his utter lack of distinction that Quevedo took him for a new court clown. His swarthy face was slack and coarse, his slovenly carriage exhibited unsparingly the faults of his figure.

“I didn’t know you could see me—but you are so confoundedly tall,” he complained to Don Luis.

“I recognized your Excellency’s hat. Your Excellency’s taste in plumes is unique,” said Don Luis. His manner was suavity itself, and the young man’s sullen look gave place to a complacent smirk. “Let me present one of the chief ornaments of our court, Don Francisco de Quevedo, who has not yet had the privilege of acquaintance with your Excellency. Don Fran-

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cisco, this is—my cousin, Don Enrique Felipe de Guzman.”

“Quevedo the wit, eh?” remarked the young gentleman, with a patronizing nod; but his face darkened with offense as Quevedo merely stood staring at him, eyes and mouth at their widest, in a plainly unflattering stupefaction. “Well, he don’t show it, I must say—old fool!” He turned on his heel and stamped away in high dudgeon.

“I hope you will forgive my relative’s abruptness, Don Francisco,” said Don Luis, gravely, suppressing a smile. “He is not yet accustomed to the manners of a court.”

“Is that—the heir of Olivares?” Quevedo demanded. “You are not playing a joke on me?”

“The joke, if it is one, is my uncle’s. That is the heir of Olivares and the son-in-law elect of the Duke of Frias.”

Don Luis bowed, taking leave with stately ceremony. The tall, dark figure wavered to Quevedo’s eyes along the green alley. Then anger succeeded astonishment, and he shot into the group about him one swift question after another. His calm acquiescence in this affront

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to their jealous Castilian pride of birth had surprised and galled his companions. Now that he seemed disposed to show proper feeling in the matter, they gladly told him all they knew, with a little guesswork thrown in for good measure.

XV

THE POWER OF THE PEN

QUEVEDO was not surprised that he was invited to supper that night by Don Luis de Haro. They talked late; and, later still, Quevedo sat alone in his own apartment, his eyes fixed and somber, his hands nervously opening and clenching on his knees.

Don Luis had been taciturn about his own wrongs, but more alive to those of Spain than he had ever been as the Count-Duke's heir—a thing that amused Quevedo. He smiled sardonically, remembering Don Luis's noble indignation, and the decidedly suggestive manner of its expression.

"If the King could only be aroused to the true state of affairs! Don Francisco, a bitter pen like yours could serve Spain better than a sword, if you would—and if you dared."

Quevedo drew his chair to the table and took

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up his pen, balancing it in his fingers as a fencer tests his weapon. If he dared—he had heard things since his return that gave those words a sinister significance. Olivares was at bay now, and to attack him would be no longer a matter for banishment. Well, if he did not sign it, who could bring the offense home to Quevedo?

He began to write, slowly and doggedly at first, then as the intoxication of the work caught him his hand drove faster and faster, and sometimes he laughed aloud with fierce satisfaction. At last he leaned back in his chair and rubbed a forehead that he now realized was aching intolerably. His nervous intensity had burned him out, and only an indomitable will had pushed his tired hand along the last scrawling, almost illegible lines. The wick of his lamp smoldered with a sickly smell, and the pale autumn dawn touched the disordered table. He put out his hand to the bell, but stopped, with arm extended. It was a wonderful piece of work, he knew—a thing to outlast centuries. It had a wild, burning vitality that had been lacking in his other work. That had sparkled, but this lived. He snatched up his pen again and wrote stiffly at the end of the last page,

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"Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas." Then, with a vague feeling of having traced his own epitaph, he shuffled the closely written sheets together, wrapped them, and sealed the packet with an unsteady splatter of wax.

"To Don Luis de Haro—quickly!" he ordered the servant who answered his call. Then, as the door closed behind the messenger, he stumbled to a couch, where he flung himself like a tired-out school-boy.

"Nobody but Quevedo could have written that," he muttered, as he fell asleep. The sunlight slanted in across his face but did not wake him. He was still sleeping when a guard came that afternoon with an order for his arrest.

Don Luis had acted promptly. The Memorial found him just rising. He read it while he dressed, and it was in the Queen's hands in time to be slipped under his Majesty's napkin at dinner. There Philip found it.

He read it through, his pale face growing ghastly. Then he laid it aside and went steadily through the form of dining. It was pure play-acting, however—the food might have been bran for all he knew. At the end of the meal he left the table with a cold dignity

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that held only as far as his own room. There, locked in alone, he gave way to a fury of humiliated terror. How dared Quevedo address such words to him? And if they were true—they burned into his mind like drops of hot lead—

Wake thee, King! whom no man loves,
No man fears, so sound thy sleep—

but they could not, they must not be true!
And yet—could a lie hurt 'so much?

There was a knock at his door, and he started to his feet, dismayed and disordered.

“Who is there?” he asked, steadying his voice as much as he could.

“It is Olivares, your Majesty. Will you be pleased to see me?”

Philip drew a deep breath and stood hesitating. He began eagerly to hope, to assure himself that conscious guilt would not come straight to him like this. He had believed in Gaspar de Guzman so long, he had staked so much on that belief, that he dared not stop believing. He hastily drew the heavy curtains at the windows, that Olivares might not see his telltale face too clearly. Then he opened the door.

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When he saw the leaves of the Memorial in the other's hand he shook with the effort it cost to maintain his composure.

"You have read it? What is your answer?"

When he had asked the question Philip involuntarily closed his eyes, dreading the confession he might see in Olivares's face.

"My answer?" Philip took fresh courage at the tone, and opened his eyes. "That if your Majesty lets this affront to your sacred dignity pass unnoticed, I myself will chastise this impudent buffoon, sword to sword."

"My dignity?" Philip was staggered. "But yourself—the charges against yourself?"

Olivares lifted his gray head proudly. "Of what does he accuse me?"

"Have you not read?"

The dark eyes met Philip's without flinching. "I only read the opening lines. That insult to your Majesty was too much—I could not go on. I came straight to your Majesty, knowing how it must have wounded you that this man whom you have loaded with favors should turn on you." His voice had been all tender

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sympathy, generous warmth. Now it chilled and hardened suddenly. "So he accuses me—of what, your Majesty? Whatever the charge may be, I can offer no defense that is new to you. My whole life has been open to you, lived under your eyes and in your service. If those years do not prove my faithfulness, there is no use in words."

Philip wished to believe—he was afraid to doubt. He disclaimed all suspicion now the more violently because it was the constant background of his thoughts.

"Should he die?" he demanded, in a gush of relief.

Olivares shook his head slowly. It would have given him real pleasure—for he had read the Memorial through, naturally—to have watched Quevedo roast at a slow fire.

"He deserves it," he said, "but that would give the matter too serious a look. Your Majesty must not seem to resent the sting of an insect. If you put the vermin where it can do no more harm—for the public safety, of course—that will be enough. Imprisonment—immediate and not too lenient—would be my counsel."

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The imprisonment was indeed immediate and by no means too lenient. When Quevedo saw his cell by the jailer's lamp, he was thankful for the straw on the floor, though that had unpleasant possibilities of its own, as he soon discovered. Old and frail as he was, however, it was not the physical hardship of his punishment that bore on him the hardest. If he could have had light and writing-materials he could have endured all the rest with philosophy—but the empty, aching idleness of those days in the dark! Back and forth he counted the links of his chains, first from right to left, then from left to right again. As a variation to this pastime, he would feel along the wall, trying to picture the stones from the surface under his hand. One day he touched a slimy creature that crawled away from his fingers. He screamed like a woman, and sat huddled, quivering, waiting till he should feel it crawling on him, sure that it was making for him in the dark. That was at the beginning. It was not so very long before he reached the point when to encounter in his groping anything unexpected, however repulsive, was an interesting experience, something that gave zest and color to life.

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He lost the sense of time. Hours and days all ran together in one long night, broken at intervals by the momentary glare of the jailer's lamp when he thrust the prisoner's food through the grating of the door. Quevedo was thrown back on his memories—well for him that they were many. He was surprised at the details stored in the subcellars of his mind. Strangely enough, the clearest of his mental pictures—clearer even than his hours with Soledad—was the Puerta del Sol in the gray dawn when he waited on the steps of Villa Mediana's palace. He heard the twang of the arbalist, he saw Panchito tearing out the bolt and hiding it in his breast. It had been many, many years since he had thought of Panchito.

After an eternity or two there came a time when the door opened—not the grating, but the door itself. Perhaps they were going to kill him, since he was so slow in dying—the important thing was that there would be a change, and he sat up eagerly, rubbing his eyes. But the door was closed again before he had become sufficiently accustomed to the light to see who had opened it. He heard the jailer going away. He settled back among the straw, his fore-

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head on his arms, and began to cry, quietly, with little smothered gulps like a disappointed child.

The straw near him rustled. He paid no attention; he was no longer afraid of the rats. He told himself whimsically that he had so little blood left they did not find it worth their while to bite him. Then a voice began to sing:

That fortune's face is double at last we understand
When crumble into rubble the palaces we planned.
In other ways than wooing men trust to their un-
doing—

“Panchito!” exclaimed Quevedo, involuntarily, then he clapped his hand to his mouth, afraid that perhaps he had gone mad. The voice spoke again.

“You remember me, Don Francisco?”

Quevedo's hands went timidly out in the darkness and touched actual flesh. It was not madness then, it was human companionship. He laughed aloud—a laugh that was more than half tears.

“Remember you? Why, it seems only yesterday that I last heard you speak—not twenty years and more ago.”

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"Is it so long?" said Panchito. There was a hint of irony in his voice, and he had a curious thick lisp that Quevedo had not remembered and yet that now seemed unaccountably familiar.

"But—how did you get here?"

"How did my master get in to La Soledad's first rehearsal?"

Quevedo laughed again. "What, are you rich enough to bribe? You have a good place, I take it."

"Yes, I have a place that suits me exactly," said the other, with an odd inflection. "Besides, it did not need a very large bribe. They are not so strict, now that Olivares is gone."

"Gone? Where? Do you mean that he is dead?"

"Not yet. He has gone with the King to encourage the army in Aragon."

"What—are the French gaining there? Are we to lose Aragon as we lost Catalonia?"

There was such real concern in Quevedo's tone that the dwarf answered with surprise and some contempt.

"Yes, it looks that way. Do you care?"

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"Care? When Spain is being broken in pieces and flung to the dogs?"

"Yes," the dwarf murmured. "That is the way the Queen talks. As for me—what is Spain? Why should I care?"

"But if the King himself has gone, surely he is rousing—"

"Rousing? I doubt if he has a spirit to rouse—but he has grown unmanageable at least. That banderilla of yours got through his hide, if it is any comfort to you. He has not been the same since then. Olivares was more than unwilling to leave Madrid just now, but, try as he might, he could not keep the King quiet, and he dared not let him go out of sight unguarded. His Excellency had to content himself with leaving a trusted spy to watch the Queen." The dwarf chuckled, then sighed. "She is not idle, far from it—now that she has a free hand. And the people are mad about her."

"Tell me—tell me everything!" Quevedo pressed close to Panchito. "To think the world is really going on! Oh, how good it is to hear talking—I had almost forgotten the sound of words."

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"Poor soul!" There was something like compunction in Panchito's voice. "How long have you been here—do you know?"

"How should I know? I only know that I have had leisure to review sixty-odd more or less well-spent years in full detail about five hundred times. Figure it out for yourself."

"You have been here nearly a year," said Panchito, gently.

"Is it summer now?" Quevedo asked. "But how funny that is! I can feel no difference. I got a chill in my bones last winter that will last the rest of my life, I think. But I had one advantage over the rest of you—I was well sheltered from the northeast wind."

"You have a brave spirit," said Panchito.

"It lives in a cowardly body, there's the trouble—but any man can bear what he must. Tell me more about the world—about Olivares."

"Yes—he has been the world for us these many years—but it will not be so much longer."

"You think that he will fall?"

The dwarf winced as he felt the pitiful thinness of the hands that clutched him. "He

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might have been in the dust by this time if only you—tell me, why did you not tell the King in your Memorial the truth about La Soledad?”

“She has suffered enough. For God’s sake, let her lie quiet in her grave.”

“Well, we will try to do without her—though he has the cleverness of the Father of Lies himself. But even Olivares makes his mistakes. He made one when he persuaded the King to acknowledge Don Juan of Austria. The Queen is fighting for her son now, and she will stop at nothing. He made another when he disinherited Don Luis de Haro. And he has made one more that he does not know—yet.”

“But how have you heard so much? Is all this common talk?” Quevedo asked.

“I have taken service in Olivares’s household,” returned Panchito.

“But—does nobody remember you?”

“Who would remember Villa Mediana’s jester? He was not a prominent person—he loved his master, and that was all there was to say of him. And I am—you may say—disguised.”

“But—” Quevedo hesitated.

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"I could not disguise my figure? I did not need to. The court is full of such. I knew what to do."

He lifted Quevedo's hand and guided it over his face. Quevedo felt under his finger-tips a shriveled, empty eyelid—ridges of scarred flesh—a distorted mouth—

"Holy Virgin!" he gasped, snatching away his hand and drawing back against the wall of the cell. "El Hermoso! Are you the spy that Olivares left?"

"Yes," said the dwarf, grimly.

"What have I said?"

"Hush, hush, poor soul!" the jester soothed him. "I would do you no more harm than I have done already. I am sorry enough for that, but there was no help for it. I thought, when I began, that a little pain of my own was all it would cost; but I have maimed right and left as I went. Never mind—the end is worth it all." He went to the door and looked out into the corridor, then came back, leaving the door open. "Safer so," he said. "We cannot be spied upon. No, I did not come here to trap you—though that was the story I told the jailer. I am hunting other game. Touch

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this, and remember what service I owe Olivares."

He knelt beside Quevedo and drew the poet's hand up to his breast. Quevedo felt the iron bolt of the crossbow, warm in its hiding-place. As he pressed it the dwarf winced.

"It has worn a sore," he explained, briefly. "But there it shall hang till I lay it on his dead breast instead of the crucifix."

Quevedo tried to speak, but his voice stuck in his throat as he thought of the years that Panchito had lived and those that he had still to live.

"It is slow work," the dwarf went on. "I thought that I had given him to the Holy Office—you know they do their work thoroughly—but he has slipped through their fingers. I shall try women next—not love-women, but the other kind. Courage a little longer, and you shall see him fall."

"Make haste," returned Quevedo, rather faintly, "unless you want me to get only a bird's-eye view of the spectacle from heaven. But," he added, gravely, "can you stand clear when he falls?"

"Stand clear?" The other laughed. "Why

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should I? I mean to go down with him, down to the very doors of death, and when he is at the lowest to tell him that Villa Mediana's fool has made a fool of Olivares. Then any one may send me to hell who chooses—at least, I shall have seen him there.”

XVI

“WAKE THEE, KING!”

THE bells of the city were sounding the hour. Queen Isabel paused in her restless pacing up and down her room to listen. Presently an ominous sound struck across the mellow babel—one carillon was playing the dirge for the dead. She lifted her hand to command the attention of a Benedictine friar who stood at the window, his keen, dark face sharp against the light. It was Diego de Arce, the Inquisitor-General.

“There is the new clock of San Placido,” said the Queen. “Every hour Madrid is reminded of the King’s shame—for there is not one in the city who does not know of the crime that gift tries to expiate. Tries to—well, Father, is there to be no further penalty? Is sacrilege like that so easily pardoned even to a king?”

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The Inquisitor rebuked her impatience with a somber look. “You know as well as I, daughter, what checked our action here. The command from Rome—”

“Whose command?” The Queen turned on him, her eyes flashing. “Oh, I know it came under the papal seal, but the voice that dictated that order was one that I have heard often, to my sorrow. It was Olivares who persuaded his Holiness to decree that the case be referred to Rome—you know that as well as I.”

“We sent the papers by an absolutely trustworthy messenger—” the Benedictine began.

“He was mortal, was he not?” The Queen flung out her hands scornfully. “You honest men! If it had been Olivares who sent the casket, he would have sent copies of the papers and kept the originals. You did not even keep copies. If that evidence is lost—” She laughed harshly.

“Do you think Paredes traveled openly as a messenger of the Holy Office?” the Inquisitor retorted, with some severity. “Give us credit for a little prudence. The evidence must have been for some time in the hands of his Holi-

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ness. The Council of the Inquisition has written to Rome, reminding him of the urgency of the matter, and I myself added a personal appeal. His delay can only mean deliberation. If your Majesty will be patient—”

“Patient?” Isabel interrupted him again. “For twenty-two years I have been patient. I have left politics to men, as I was told a woman should—and I have seen a man mad with pride fling away kingdom after kingdom of my husband’s dominions. But now I have borne a son—as I was told a woman should!—and I swear that my son shall be more than a poor King of Castile. *Ventre St. Gris!*” She threw out her father’s favorite oath with a sudden fierce imitation of his manner. “Olivares has forgotten whose blood is in me. If Rome fails us in this, we will give Don Gaspar reason to remember that only fools despised Henry of Navarre.” She controlled herself with an effort. “Enough of words,” she said. “I will be patient, as you say—for a while. Then I will not speak, I will act. Now I am going to Don Diego’s studio—he is painting an altar-piece for my oratory. Will you look at it, Father?”

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Followed by the priest and her ladies in waiting, she swept into the studio, her face still livid with anger. Velasquez turned from his easel as she entered, with an unconscious gesture of proud delight toward the all but finished picture.

Isabel acknowledged his salutation, and, coming forward, she stood silent before the painting. As she looked at it the angry flush faded from her cheeks and tears gathered in her eyes. It was a noble composition, with the strange, stormy coloring of an autumn sunset. Throned among clouds, the Father and the Son held a crown over the head of the Virgin. She had the face of one who has passed through all joy and all sorrow into a place of utter quietness—one whose lost mortality has left her weary, who has not yet put on the radiant vigor of eternity. Perhaps Velasquez had no conscious thought of Soledad when he painted that face, perhaps he painted it with Soledad in mind—Soledad hallowed by love and sorrow and death, the lights and shadows of her story as he had heard it mellowed by the merciful years. The Queen did not recognize the likeness, but something in the face made her

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think of her own youth—of the days when she had first been Queen of Spain. Her hand trembled as she crossed herself, and the tears that stood in her eyes rolled slowly down on her rich dress.

“Mother of Sorrows,” she murmured, forgetting herself and those about her, “you understand! you understand!”

“It takes a woman to understand a woman, your Majesty, and the Queen of Heaven to understand the Queen of Spain.”

It was El Hermoso, who had been standing in the shadow, unobserved. The Queen drew herself up haughtily, disdaining to wipe away her tears.

“You magnify your office,” she said, significantly. “Our taste in art will hardly interest his Excellency—so your supervision is not needed here. You may go.”

El Hermoso bowed and obeyed. This was the moment for which he had been haunting the studio. As he passed the Inquisitor he clumsily overturned a portfolio full of sketches that flew in all directions. As he stooped to pick them up he snatched a small sketch from his coat and flicked it, face up, to the friar’s

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feet. It was a man's head, done in a few salient strokes, a thing to catch the eye. It caught the Grand Inquisitor's. As the dwarf, with an exclamation of apparent annoyance, made a snatch for it, the other's long arm forestalled him.

“What is this, Don Diego?” he asked.

Velasquez glanced at the sketch. “I thought his Excellency took all of those,” he said, concerned. “One day at a procession he wagered with his Majesty about my ability to draw a face from memory, and they chose this one from the crowd. His Excellency won the wager, and was so pleased with the drawing that he had me make ten copies for gifts. I am sorry to have cheated him—he paid me for the full number.”

“Give your master the drawing,” said the Inquisitor, handing it to El Hermoso. “I would not wish to deprive him of his due.”

A sinister meaning in his tone caught the Queen's attention. She raised her eyes quickly to his, and a moment later she left the studio. In the corridor she whispered impulsively to him:

“What is it? What do you know?”

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"That Rome will say nothing about the crime of San Placido, because Rome will know nothing. That drawing was of the messenger Paredes—nobody could mistake it. There were copies enough to send to every Italian port where he might land. He is now dead or in a dungeon, and the casket of papers—ashes. I know it as well as if I had seen them burn. Olivares has outwitted us."

"He has outwitted the Holy Office," said Isabel, coldly. "Now he has to deal with a woman fighting for her son's birthright. He will find that a different thing—and not so easy, it may be."

Don Luis de Haro, answering an urgent summons from the Queen, found her pacing an obscure gallery of the palace. She beckoned him to walk beside her. Her attendants stood by one of the farther windows, looking out on the courtyard and gossiping among themselves. When she was well out of ear-shot of the group she spoke.

"The Holy Office has failed, thanks to your shrewd uncle. The messenger has been captured and the evidence destroyed—while we cannot prove it, we have no room for doubt.

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I am not surprised—the delay at Rome made me suspicious, before other things confirmed it. There is one weapon left, and that must strike home—no more bungling now! There is not time for it. If the King continues to see only through the eyes of the Count-Duke, not even the crown of Castile will be left for my son.”

“Portugal may be regained,” Don Luis suggested, tentatively.

“Not in your time or mine. Olivares has done his work there too thoroughly. It would be as impossible to revive our power in Portugal as to make a living man of the pieces the mob left of Vasconcellos, through whom Olivares tried to force Portugal to his will. Now that the worst has come, he lays the blame on the Duchess of Mantua, the Vice-reine—poor soul! Do I not know how great a share of the government she must have had? What power would Olivares or a servant of his allow to a woman?” The Queen turned her blazing eyes on Don Luis. “But she has power of a kind, in spite of him, for she knows the truth. He is afraid of her—why else should he shut her in the fortress of Ocana but for

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fear that she might show the King where the real blame lies? A princess of the blood, his Majesty's own cousin, kept a prisoner! The King and Olivares are now on their way back to Madrid. Before they come the Duchess of Mantua must be brought from Ocana to my apartments at the palace. Can you do this?"

Don Luis drew a long breath of satisfaction and smiled. "I am your Majesty's servant to the uttermost," he said, simply.

When the King and Olivares entered Madrid a fortnight later, the street crowds beset the Queen's path with blessings compared to which the few decorous cheers for the King seemed perfunctory and half-hearted. As for the Count-Duke, the people received him with a silence of the quality whose next degree expresses itself in flying stones.

That night El Hermoso was crouching on the hearth in the Count-Duke's apartments. He was holding the iron shaft between his hands like a crucifix, his gaze fixed upon it and his lips moving in a sort of ecstasy. There was a creaking behind him—all at once he realized that it had been going on for some time. He thrust his relic back in his dress and stretched

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his short neck, peering into the dimly lighted room. Olivares sat in the great arm-chair, evidently unaware of any presence in the room but his own. One thin, sallow hand was clenched on the arm of the chair, and he leaned his forehead on the other, hiding his face. The whole man was pitifully aged and shrunken, and he shook with long shivers as in ague. The chair, solid as it was, shook with him, creaking. The firelight shone on the bent head, and as the dwarf watched a tear slid between the fingers, hung a moment, then fell. Another followed, and another, all in the same terrible silence broken only by the creaking of the chair and the fitful murmur of the fire. The embers died down and the room was dark. Snow began to whisper against the window, and hour after hour the city clocks measured out the night, the clock of San Placido among them—and still through the darkness the dwarf heard the creaking of the shaken chair.

Olivares, on closing the King's curtains that night, had felt a hostile tension of the atmosphere, and had pleaded weariness, coupled with a request for permission to retire from public

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life—the move that had so often brought the insubordinate King to terms. This time the suggestion had been met with silence, nor did the minister find the King's mood more favorable on the following day. Praise of the Queen and condemnation of Olivares were in the air. It was half unconsciously, as a weaker turns to a stronger, that Philip turned into the corridor leading to the Queen's apartments.

He was startled when two figures slipped from a dark corner and barred his way—a dwarf and a woman bent and tremulous with age, who fell on her knees before him and caught his garments with shaking hands.

“My little one! My little one!” she quavered.

Philip stooped and peered at her.

“I cannot see your face at all by this light,” she said. “By the full light of noon I can see but dimly—and now I can only see you as a shadow. That is better, perhaps. They tell me you have changed from the little lad I nursed and loved.”

“Ana! Ana de Guevara!”

She caught his hand and held it to her withered cheek. “Ah, you have not forgotten your old nurse, the only mother you ever

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knew! I was sure it was not you who banished me—”

“I, Ana? I never banished you.”

“Surely, surely, you never sent me away, I know,” she repeated. “You only forgot me. That was not strange, after all—you were a young man and a King, and an old woman does not ask remembrance from such.”

Philip bit his lip. The rebuke was the more severe for the utter simplicity and submission of the speaker.

“But I never forgot,” the cracked voice crooned. “I never forgot. I was so proud, nursing you. When you were too eager and hurt me, I only laughed at the pain. A lusty prince, I thought—he will be a strong king. I am giving him the strength by which he shall grow to rule Spain. So I thought in my heart—was I too bold? My little one, to every mother her son is royal, but to how few it is given to suckle a king indeed!”

Philip had no answer for her.

“But you have not ruled Spain”—and suddenly he felt her cheek wet against his hand—“you have not even ruled Philip. Oh, I know how it came about—I saw from the first how

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it would be. I hated and distrusted him always—that was why he sent me away. He thought I might warn you. Warn you? Was I a fool, to waste my breath so? Not God Himself could' have warned you then—no, not with all the holy angels round Him. You were drunk with the new wine of life—do I not know? I have had other sons—but when the wine is sour on the stomach and heavy in the head, that is the time for warning, not when it is running through the veins like fire. They told me he would kill me if I came to Madrid. Let him, said I. I am old—plow me under if it may help Spain to blossom again.”

Philip trembled as before a voice from heaven. It seemed no mortal woman, but his own conscience made visible, that clung about his knees.

“I will atone for all these years,” he said, thickly. “You shall never leave me again. I will give you—”

“Gifts?” The tremulous old voice was all at once clear and sharp. “What do I want of gifts? I shall soon be done with earth and its needs. One gift I ask of you, only one. Give me back my faith in you!”

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He bent and raised her. “We shall meet again by daylight, mother,” he said, “when you shall not need to dread the sight of my face. By God’s aid, you shall have your gift.”

“Even God cannot help you to give it to her while you keep the devil at your right hand,” said the dwarf.

The King recognized the familiar thick lisp of El Hermoso, and recoiled, scenting treachery. “What are you doing here?” he asked, suspiciously.

“He brought me here,” said the old woman.

“He has been very kind to me.”

“You brought her here?” Philip reiterated, dully. It seemed like a fantastic dream. “In God’s name, why?”

“Not in God’s name, but in the name of a dead man whom Olivares wronged even more deeply than he did yourself, your Majesty,” said El Hermoso.

“A dead man—”

“Long dead. Villa Mediana.”

The King stood very still. “The man who had known Soledad’s love could afford to die,” he said, bitterly, after a moment.

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"Ah, but that man still lives!" the dwarf replied.

"No—" Philip, with a groan, thrust out trembling hands as if to fend off an actual danger. "No—I cannot believe it—it would be too horrible. Why, he could not have done this thing—I have believed in him as I have believed in God."

"So did she," the dwarf put in, relentlessly, "and the truth killed her."

The King stood for a moment, his brain benumbed. Then came a host of memories, misgivings, suspicions that had been formless. With a smothered cry of "No—impossible! impossible!" he turned from them and rushed blindly down the corridor. He did not hear the sound of voices that showed the Queen was not alone. Dazed, panting, he went in.

The Queen and her companion had risen at his hand on the latch and stood waiting him. Behind them he saw his son, Baltasar Carlos, his handsome boyish face all excitement, eyes shining, lips apart. The woman whom the Queen held by the hand was the Duchess of Mantua, Margaret of Savoy.

She met the King's fixed gaze with one as

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steady. The silence seemed to stretch out indefinitely.

“What have you to say to me?” he asked, finally.

“Read these, your Majesty,” she answered. “Then you shall say to me what you choose.”

Philip frowned at the packet of papers she held out to him. “What are these?” he asked.

“The proofs of who is to blame for the loss of Portugal.”

“Proofs?”

She smiled. “I could not expect your Majesty to decide so important a question on the unsubstantiated word of one person.” He frowned still more heavily, with a sinking heart. What else had he done? “Even though that person were a princess of the blood, your own cousin. Therefore I have brought you authentic letters from men of consequence—state documents—private commands from your minister to his. I beg your Majesty to read them and by that light to judge me.”

The room was very quiet as Philip scanned one after another of the papers. When he folded the last and laid it carefully with the others, he sat staring before him, his lax under-

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lip sternly set. Misrule, tyranny—all the miserable story—and he, the King of Spain, had been a mere toy in the hands of this man who pretended to be his friend. He wondered how one could see the faith of a lifetime so broken and still live. No wonder it had killed Soledad when she knew the truth.

He was roused by the voice of the Queen speaking to him. She knelt before him with their son. Philip put out his hands to her with a word of protest, but she evaded them.

“No—let me kneel here,” she said, “as so many before me have knelt—brave men whose love of their country’s honor has cost them liberty and even life. I have the right to join their ranks, for I, too, have suffered at the hands of Olivares. He could not touch my life, or even my liberty, but he has taken from me that which a woman holds above these. I am your wife—and he has cheapened me to the rank of the lowest harlot he threw into your arms. I am one of your many women—the only one you never cast wholly away. I have borne you daughter after daughter, poor dregs of your weariness, too weak to fight their

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way in this world that is so hard for women. I have wept when they died, because I was their mother—but all that is strong in me has thanked God. Now I have a son. You begot him—why do you leave him orphan and disinherited? King of Spain, I claim of you my son's birthright.”

“You shall have it,” he answered, hoarsely. “Henceforth I will rule the kingdom of my fathers—and of my son—with no help under Heaven's but yours. I will swear it before the altar.”

As the Queen opened the door of the oratory Philip raised his eyes devoutly to the altar, where Velasquez had enthroned his picture in its appointed place. It seemed only natural to him that he should look into the desolate serenity of that face, where he saw, with eyes cleared at last from lust and anger, the soul of all that Olivares had killed in him through these devastating years. One hand on the shoulder of Baltasar Carlos, the other clasping the hand of the Queen, he passed with them into the oratory, and the doors closed.

Presently the Queen returned, with Baltasar Carlos, closing the doors once more on the soli-

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tary figure of the King kneeling before the altar.

“He wants to pray awhile alone,” she said, holding out her arms to the Duchess. “Margaret, Margaret, we have won! The devil is cast out.”

XVII

“IF ONLY HE WERE!”

IN the Queen's chamber Philip wrote and despatched to the Count-Duke a few unmistakable words of dismissal, granting him the leisure he had so often sought, and bidding him depart to enjoy it where he would. Then he called Don Luis de Haro to attend him to his room. That night the King slept well.

The face upon which his waking eyes opened was that of Olivares. For a moment he blinked incredulously, wondering whether he was not yet fully awake, or had dreamed the occurrences of the evening before. Then, as his clearing vision took in the meaning of that face, he knew he had not dreamed.

Olivares knelt for a while in silence, waiting for the King to speak. Philip had no thought of speaking—the matter had gone far beyond words with him. Dignified with an immeas-

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urable sadness, his pale eyes looked steadily into those of his former friend as across an abyss choked with dead.

At last Olivares could bear the strain no longer. He strove for his old self-control, but vainly, and there was a pitiable tremor in his voice.

“I know whose work this is—I know those who have hated me and coveted my power. Now it seems that they have robbed me of my dearest treasure—the confidence of your Majesty. That is the only prize I grudge them—the only thing I have lost which I would struggle to recover. I am too weary to fight, even for my honor. I have given my best years to the service of my King and my country, and now I am a broken man—broken in health, broken in heart, old before my time. Your Majesty is my witness how often I have tried to give up the responsibilities which now you take from me. At your command I would go willingly to exile or whatever fate you might assign me; but in the name of all my labors, for the sake of my long devotion, do not let me go under the shadow of your displeasure! Let me at least have this reward—I ask no

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other—for the life that I have given you so freely—the assurance that my King still loves me, still trusts me!”

Philip was silent.

“My plans have failed, I know—but by no fault of my own, as Heaven is my witness. What man can succeed with all the world, with fate itself, against him? The hard heart of the people, the jealousy of the nobles, treachery abroad and at home—what could I do single-handed against all these? If your Majesty had only taken the active part in the government that I urged upon you when first you came to the throne—ah, I have been weak there, I know. I should have pressed it with more determination—but I thought, he is young, made for joy and beauty—I am his servant, fit only for the ruder labor of life. Let him go his glad way care-free in the sunshine—I will bear his burdens. And they have crushed me—” Olivares paused, a real sob in his voice.

Philip was silent.

“How do I know what they have told you, those who have plotted my ruin?” cried Olivares, wildly. “I am like one who walks in the dark, surrounded by unseen assassins. I

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am stabbed, and do not know who deals the blow, nor whence it comes, nor what weapon draws my blood. Sire, sire, have you no pity for your faithful servant? Can all my love, all my loyalty, weigh so lightly with you? God of justice—is a man's whole life, body and soul, worth no more than this?"

Philip was silent.

Olivares looked at him with a sinking of terror. That pale, expressionless face gave no sign that his vehement pleadings had even been heard. Those melancholy eyes were warmed by no flicker of feeling, however momentary—they seemed to look straight through Olivares's desperate frenzy into unknown depths. The fallen minister flung all the force of his eloquence against that stony reserve, but in vain. Over and over he pleaded, till the stammering voice died hoarsely in his throat and hope in his heart.

And still Philip was silent.

The Countess of Olivares was a woman of courage as well as of ambition. Gaspar de Guzman had done her somewhat less than justice when he described her to Soledad and to

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his son. She had of late been fully aware of the perilous wavering of their fortunes. All that a woman's tact and guile could do she had tried, but, her efforts having proved futile, she did the supremely difficult thing—waited quietly for whatever end to their suspense fate might put. It was to this woman that Olivares returned from the King's bedside.

It was characteristic of their companionship that they met with no confession of failure from the one, no tender sympathy from the other. He merely directed her to go as speedily as possible to Loeches with their household, and make the place ready for his coming, as it was his purpose to retire from the duties of state—for a time—and rest.

The Countess stood looking at him. Even then there was no pity in her eyes, only the reflection of his own despair. The vermilion on her boldly painted cheeks stood out in hideous relief against the pallor beneath, as on the face of a corpse.

“This means the end, then?” she asked, simply.

“Not the end,” he answered. “It is for a time—only for a time.”

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The iron certainty of himself was gone. The words trailed pitifully into silence. The Countess stared at him for a moment with dead eyes, then she passed slowly from the room. He could hear her giving orders to the servants concerning the journey.

El Hermoso, lurking in the shadow of the table, saw his master go to the heavy sideboard and pour himself a glass of wine. All at once his hand contracted, shattering the costly goblet. The splinters showered ringing to the floor, his hand dropped unheeded at his side, wine and blood running from the limp fingers—and he laughed.

His orders were obeyed, and Loeches was made ready for his coming; but still he could not give up hope, and lingered on in Madrid. One must believe that a dwelling reflects in some measure the state of its inmates, for though not one of the sumptuous decorations of Olivares's apartments at Buen Retiro had been removed, every room seemed full of a restless suspense. One almost expected the whole magnificent structure to vanish in a moment, like a mirage, so entirely gone was the quality of stability.

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Up and down the empty rooms Olivares paced incessantly. Night and day the sound of his plodding feet echoed spectrally through the silence. He had been denied further access to the person of the King—his last link with the court, his keys of office, had been demanded and surrendered—still he lingered, hoping, with a persistency that touched madness.

Don Luis had his triumph—the fallen man had even begged his intercession with the King, which had been freely given. Don Luis was not meanly vindictive. His hurt pride once healed, he did his utmost to mitigate his uncle's disgrace. That utmost was of no avail, however; the King's spirit, so pliable in other days, had grown strangely hard. Many favors were granted at Don Luis's entreaty to those who had served Olivares, but for himself there was no mercy. And the King's patience was wearing thin. He had gone to the Escorial at last for a few days of hunting, hoping that during his absence the incubus might be removed. Don Luis had done his best to that end, but persuasion and argument had alike been fruitless—Olivares was as far past argument as a man

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clinging to the edge of a precipice. Now it was the day set for the King's return, and still that haggard specter haunted the desolate place that had been the setting of his past glory.

Olivares paced back and forth, back and forth, while El Hermoso, squatted in a corner, followed the moving figure with malignant eyes. He began whimsically matching the steps against the ticking of the clock. Which would keep it up the longest? The clock might run down before long; but it could be wound up again. Who could wind up the man when he ran down? Already the steps began to drag a little. The jester licked his lips nervously, like a wolf at the heels of a dying tiger.

A distant sound came from the street. They had been shouting so all day—one would think it was a great festival. Olivares paced on, with no sign that he heard, his face desolate and vacant like the rooms. Back and forth—back and forth.

All at once he halted, and intelligence flashed back to his blank eyes. El Hermoso followed the look and saw Don Luis standing on the threshold. The older man stretched out to the

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younger a hand which not all his will could keep steady. Don Luis came forward slowly, his head bent. His austere, colorless face seemed even paler than usual. There was a long silence.

“His Majesty has come back?” Olivares asked at last. His voice shook—one would almost have called it timid.

“Yes,” said Don Luis.

“Did he speak—of me?”

“Yes.”

There was another pause, then Don Luis raised his head resolutely, as if what he had to tell required courage to speak as well as to hear.

“There is no help for it,” he said, “no use in putting it off. You must know. When he came into the palace he turned to me. ‘Is *he* gone?’ and when I told him not yet, he shrugged his shoulders and frowned. ‘Is he waiting for us to use force?’ he said. Ah, believe me, it is no pleasure to me that I must tell you this! I have done all that can be done, but he is not to be moved.”

Olivares stood for a moment, his mouth twitching, his uneasy fingers picking at the

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buttons of his doublet. Then he lurched forward a step.

"I will go to him—myself," he said, hoarsely.

Don Luis caught his arm. "For the love of Heaven, do not set foot in the streets to-day!" he cried, in unfeigned alarm. "The whole city knows that you have fallen, and has gone mad. The very children, if they had the chance, would beat out your life with stones and tear your body in pieces."

Olivares straightened himself and shook off the detaining hand. The face he turned on his nephew told all its old arrogance.

"So!" he said. "I understand now—this is a plot to keep me from the King. I have been credulous, but now your fraud grows too impudent, it betrays itself. Do you think I am ignorant of what the rabble dare—and what is beyond them to dare? I have trusted you, like a fool. Yes, you have done all that can be done—to further your own spite! If the King wishes to be rid of me, he himself must tell me."

"Has he not told you?" said Don Luis, patiently.

"He has been abused, played upon," Oli-

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vares insisted. “Now I will make him see the truth—I shall know what to say to him.” He lifted his hands with a wild gesture of power. “I have been sick and weak—now I am strong again. Now I can speak words of steel and fire. I could move heaven and earth to-day—heaven and earth and hell and the heart of a king.”

“He is mad,” said Don Luis to the jester, low and urgently. “He must not go—I spoke less than the truth.”

El Hermoso shrugged his shoulders. “How could I stop him?” he said.

“But are there no servants? He must not go out openly, like this. It is a question not of mere death.” Unwilling to use force on the broken giant, Don Luis moved reluctantly forward.

But Olivares stopped of his own accord, and even recoiled before the man who now entered the room. It was his Excellency Don Enrique Felipe de Guzman, manifestly in a bad temper, and not without cause. His rich clothing was soiled and disordered, and his face stained with mud. He had a cut on his cheek, and he nursed it with his laced handkerchief, which

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he inspected critically from time to time to see if the bleeding had stopped. He made not the most perfunctory salute to Olivares, but stood with his draggled hat on the back of his head, scowling viciously.

"A pretty kindness you have done me!" he began.

Don Luis flicked off the hat with the end of his sheathed rapier. "May I suggest," he remarked, "that a well-bred son uncovers in his father's presence?"

Don Enrique Felipe snarled at him, but cringed at the same time.

"You are his heir," Don Luis went on, "and now, if ever, you should stand by him."

"His heir!" The explosion of Don Enrique Felipe's grievances closely approximated a howl. "Yes—heir to what? Disgrace—insults—mud and stones."

Don Luis looked from the excited young man to the ashy, immovable face of Olivares, and his mouth hardened to cold distaste. "I should say," he observed, softly, "that you have precisely your deserts."

Don Enrique Felipe changed his tone. "Oh

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yes,” he whimpered, “that comes very well from you—you would have stood in my shoes if you could. Well, you may thank the saints you didn’t. You are cock of the walk now and can say what you like to me. I’m nobody. Nobody? Less than nobody, worse than nobody. I was nobody before and happy enough. Then he came and spoiled all my life for me, curse him!”

“Silence, for shame!” commanded Don Luis.

The other laughed rudely. “Shame, what have I to do with it? They have no use for it in the fine family I married into—much choice I had! They make rhymes about it in the Liars’ Walk—‘The Constable of Spain, you see, nothing disgraceful seems to me.’ You heard that, I suppose, and laughed at it, too. Oh, we are a fine basket of bad eggs! Poor Inez, that I sent packing because he told me to, was worth the whole rotten lot—but it’s no use thinking of that now. She’s in the convent where he sent her—much good she is to me there! and yet she’s my wife, after all, as it turns out. That’s a good joke, isn’t it? Something for you to enjoy. They say you hate me for tak-

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ing your place—the more fool you, if you do. It was a lucky day for you when you dropped out of the business. I wish you had kept your place—you would have had the stones then, and I would have been comfortable in my little house—with Inez.”

He began to cry, loudly, childishly. The tears smudged the dirt and blood on his face in comical smears like the fantastic painting of a clown.

“I never liked that cold, skinny chit of a girl—Inez would have made six of her! But it’s not pleasant to be kicked out, all the same.”

“Better to speak of this privately,” said Don Luis, sternly, with an apprehensive glance toward the silent, motionless figure.

“No, damn him!” gulped Don Enrique Felipe, “I’ll tell him. Let him take his share of the dose—he mixed it. My dear father-in-law Frias has chosen to find that my first marriage was all good and binding, after all—that’s how it is.”

Don Luis made a low sound of disgust. “I had not thought that possible,” he said. “Can he not see—”

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“To be sure—” Don Enrique Felipe nodded with an ugly laugh. “I told him what it would make of his daughter, and didn’t mince my words—he sees well enough. But what do you think he answered me?” He was choking with fury. Ignoring Don Luis’s protest, he sputtered on: “‘Better a strumpet and free than an honest woman and Guzman’s wife!’ That is the way your great nobles talk—the devil take them! I wish he had done it before they got me into their company. Here I am cheated of everything, thanks to you.” He spat the words at Olivares. “And you with not a word to say for yourself. A wonderful Conqueror you are! You have ruined me, do you hear, ruined me—”

His angry scream stopped as suddenly as if some one had taken him by the throat, and his purple rage faded to gray fright. Suddenly, without warning, Olivares fell forward and lay motionless as an overturned statue. Don Luis swept the son from the room with a swift, violent gesture, not trusting himself to words. Then he knelt beside the prostrate man, whose hands the dwarf was already chafing.

“Is he dead?” The dwarf’s question had

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a sharp note of desperate anxiety. "Is he dead?"

Don Luis slipped his hand inside Olivares's doublet over the heart. "No—God pity him!" he answered. "If only he were!"

XVIII

INTO THE NIGHT

THE day following Olivares's second visit to the smithy Gaspar laid aside his hammer when his work was done. Silvano clapped him heartily on the shoulder when he came from the forge.

"That's right!" was his approving word. "You have been practising too much for a while past—one gets stale that way—but I said nothing, for every man must do his work as he thinks best, and it does no good to meddle even when one means to help."

Gaspar nodded rather absently. He was comparing the smith's quiet, frank face with that other face which seemed to him the symbol of all falsehood.

"There was just one thing I needed to understand," he said, smiling. "I have it now."

"I know. A knack of balancing the hammer

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or of placing a blow. You work and work, and it seems you will never get it. And then, all at once, there it is."

"And then, all at once, there it is." Gaspar seized Silvano's hand and gripped it hard. "I owe you a great deal, father," he said.

"Don't talk as if you were settling with José for a dinner," Silvano returned, highly pleased. "I am glad of whatever we have given each other, my son."

"I am only just beginning to realize how much you have given me. Where is Rosaria?"

The smith's genial face clouded. "She has gone to the churchyard, I think," he answered, with some constraint. Gaspar's unrelenting hardness toward Soledad was the one trait in him that had disappointed Silvano.

"Has she gone already? Well, I will overtake her." He turned toward the path by the river, the way she usually went.

"You are going *there*, my son?" the smith asked.

"Yes." Gaspar smiled rather sadly, and added, "I can understand, now."

Silvano would not have known how to put his gladness in words had he been inclined to

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do so. There was no need—it glorified his face. The memory of that look went with Gaspar like a benediction as he walked quickly along the path by the river. His tread was proud and strong, and he held his head high. When he saw Rosaria's little figure ahead of him he looked at her with new eyes that held a depth of tenderness he had never felt before.

“Careful, dear!” he called. She was holding by a tree, bending over the bank to look into the eddy where the leaves spun, as he had done so often in his thoughts. At the sound of his voice she started and lost her balance—it almost looked as if she had flung herself forward into the water. Gaspar had one wild glimpse of her disappearing under the tawny swirl of the eddy, then he plunged after her. The strength of all those hours of feverish hammering was in his arms as he caught her from the whirling pool and pulled her and himself to safety by the twisted roots that hung from the bank. Left behind in the spinning water, Rosaria's flowers sailed around and around with the leaves and the chips.

“Little child!” he said, carrying her back to the smithy as if she had indeed been a child.

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"How could you be so careless! Thank God you fell into the pool. If the current had caught you—" He held her closer.

"You would have been free."

She did not say it—although her heart was beating it against his breast, he did not hear. She only said, "Is anything wrong at home?"

"Little Saint Martha! No — nothing is wrong, now. I was going to my mother's grave."

She felt more like drowning than she had when the water closed over her head. To her it was his confession that he had now wronged his mother more than Soledad had wronged him. She wondered why the blessed Virgin had not let her die, since she was only a hindrance to Gaspar—had always been a hindrance. She had lost all faith in herself. She had meant him only good, and she had hampered him at his great moment, and failed him in every need except the merest hungers of the body—even now, when she meant to free him, she had bungled it ridiculously and only put his life in danger. It is very probable that in her desperation she might have made another and more successful attempt, bearing in mind

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what he said about the current; but it was a long time before she rose from the sharp sickness that held her helpless. When she could walk alone again, the time for sacrifice was past—the news of the heir of Olivares had reached Las Espadas.

It did not shock Gaspar as Olivares had hoped it would. All the conclusions it was meant to drive home so bitterly Gaspar had already reached of his own accord. His own experience had made the matter clear to him—his mother had simply been deceived as he himself had been, and there had been nothing to restrain her from working out her folly to the end. He was no longer ashamed of her, for he understood. He heard the news of Don Enrique Felipe with a smile—the ironic humor of it amused him. It was Silvano, José, and Father Esteban who were shocked and angry. As for Rosaria, the cold weight at her heart grew a little colder, a little heavier. The loss was irrevocable now—she had failed him again. And they must live on and make what they could of the years. A listless inward weariness grew upon her, though it did not affect her faithful housewifery or her quiet, pleasant ways—

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only she never sang at her work now. So their uneventful days went by till the time of the King's return from Aragon.

It was a mild night, more like late March than January. Silvano and Gaspar had gone to the inn for a friendly evening with José—Gaspar welcomed the company of other men now as much as he had dreaded it in the days when he felt that his shame was written on his forehead. It was a relief for Rosaria to be alone—the very sight of Gaspar's content and cheerfulness was beginning to be an intolerable torment to her, feeling as she did that it was still a mask, as it had been. She sat by the window looking toward the cypresses of the churchyard, and tears gathered in her eyes—the hot, hopeless tears that do not fall but seem to burn into the brain. She thought of Soledad's face by the window of the smithy, and she understood the mother's pain as she had not then. When she must tell Gaspar that they were to have a child, would she see a shadow of that look in his face?

There was a knock at the door, and she started up. "Who is it?" she called.

"An old friend bringing good news."

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She opened the door and saw the buffoon standing on the threshold. His face was haggard, and his one eye shone feverishly, but his manner was wildly jocular.

"Yes," he rattled on, "my feet are beautiful on the mountains for the first time since they began to shuffle through the world." He broke into a high-pitched laugh that it seemed as if he could never stop.

Rosaria raised the lamp and looked at him, astonished and half frightened. As he saw her face in the lamplight his laugh stopped short.

"Holy Virgin, how miserable you are! Has it left him so unhappy as all that? I never wanted to hurt *you*, poor child!" He laughed again, bitterly, at her perplexity. "No, I am not crazy—nor am I drunk, unless it is from a very subtle liquor that has so far kept off the lists of the tax-collectors. I have a pleasant sight for you—at least, I find it pleasant. It is a very moral spectacle, at all events. Where is your husband? Where is handsome Gaspar? Tell him that a traveler is asking for the smith."

"He is at the inn," said Rosaria. "Do you really want me to call him?"

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"At the inn? Fie on him—young husbands should stay at home. Yes, bring him here—bring the whole town if you like!"

Rosaria, now convinced that the dwarf was either drunk or insane, threw her shawl around her and hurried to the inn. It was no uncommon thing for Gaspar to be called from the company by some need for his services, although there was little travel in winter as a rule, and when he went with her it aroused no curiosity strong enough to take any one from the fireside into the night. The warm day had softened the snow so that it gave underfoot, and Gaspar insisted on carrying Rosaria home. As he lifted her he exclaimed at her lightness.

"Are you well, dear?" he asked, anxiously.

"Of course," she said. Her voice trembled in spite of her, and she hid her face against his shoulder.

"Rosaria—" He hesitated and bent his head, trying to see her face. As they came in sight of the coach standing before the smithy he only touched his lips softly to her hair as he set her down on the threshold of their home. Then, looking in, he stood stupefied in the doorway.

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On the settle by the fire a man lay exhausted, one hand hanging limply, almost as if in death. Beside him the dwarf sat on the floor hugging his knees.

“Well, young man,” he said, “if you ever were sorry that you let his Excellency go alone that night, here is balm for your regret. You were wise, you see. He is hardly a father to be proud of just now.”

Gaspar took a step forward with an exclamation of incredulity.

“Yes, it is Olivares right enough,” said El Hermoso, grimly. “He has been swept out of the palace as one sweeps any broken thing that has had its day. He stole from the city in a closed coach—not the one with gilded wheels that used to crowd people against the house walls as it swaggered through the streets. It was all he could do to bribe a driver—and he dared not take the highroad for fear of assassins—he knew their ways, having employed them in his time. Here he is, down in the dust where he has laid so many. He did not take his fall easily, you see. Look at him, Gaspar, and thank God for whatever kept you from being Gaspar de Guzman.”

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As the dwarf turned the ravaged face toward the light Rosaria ran forward with an irrepressible cry of pity and knelt over him, hiding him from his son's eyes.

"That's the woman of it," commented the dwarf, dryly. "I'll wager Soledad would have done the same."

Olivares raised himself suddenly, pushing the girl aside. His glittering eyes turned from one to the other of them without seeing them.

"There's a woman here," he said. "Take her away—I'll have nothing to do with women. One can never be rid of them, damn them. I should have strangled her that first night at the theater—I could have done it easily. But then I should not have had Gaspar—he will be to me what Don Juan of Austria was to the great Philip; but I shall know better how to use him. He is a fool like his mother—but what a soldier! Men will follow him for the love of it. Portugal, Catalonia, Aragon—all mine! Conqueror of the world! What does a crown matter? Let the King wear that—I could not bear the weight of it with this pain in my head; but the power—that is mine, mine, mine—" He stretched out his arms with an

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exultant laugh, closing his fingers slowly and relentlessly. "The strong hand!"

A discordant guffaw from the dwarf echoed him. Something in the sound brought back Olivares's wandering senses. He looked about him blankly, till he saw the tall, immovable figure of his son. For a time that seemed interminable the two men looked at each other, then the older staggered to his feet. He stumbled and would have fallen but for Gaspar's arm. With a deep, racking groan of utter humiliation, Olivares flung free of his son's support.

"El Hermoso!" he gasped, peremptorily.

Leaning on the dwarf's shoulder, he reeled out into the night, hurling the door shut behind him.

XIX

UNDERSTANDING

IN his remotest country house of Toro, high among the Zamora hills, Olivares lay in a room shuttered against the hot July sun. Even in the dimness one could see the glitter of his wild eyes. There was no rest for them, no rest for the gray head turning constantly from side to side on the pillow, no rest for the parched muttering lips and the hot hands that would not be quiet on the coverlet. The last rites of the Church were over, and only the doctor and El Hermoso remained with the dying man. The dwarf crouched beside the bed, his single eye fixed hungrily on the sharpening face.

The doctor touched him kindly, pitying the faithful little creature. "I am afraid there is no hope of his knowing you again," he said. "Possibly, just at the end, there may be a flash of consciousness, but it is not likely."

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El Hermoso shrugged off the doctor's hand with a barely suppressed snarl. "He must know me before he dies, do you hear?" he muttered. "He must know me before he dies, or what has my life been worth? Will I let all these years be wasted, do you think?"

The doctor sighed with discouragement—was he to have two madmen on his hands instead of one?—and let the dwarf alone. El Hermoso clutched the side of the bed and watched. The ceaseless muttering grew lower and lower, the rolling head moved more and more feebly. The doctor yawned.

"Poor soul, he will soon rest now—and then we too can rest. You may speak to him now, if you like. It is doubtful if he hears you, but it can do no harm."

El Hermoso stood on tiptoe and closed his hands greedily on one of the restless hands. Olivares fretted at the restraint, and his fingers still moved as if picking at the coverlet.

"Villa Mediana," the dwarf whispered, too low for the doctor to hear. Olivares showed no sign of consciousness. El Hermoso's breath quickened, and he pulled himself nearer to the face on the pillow. "Soledad," he said, raising

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his voice. "Soledad—Soledad!" Then, in a savage outcry: "Gaspar! Have you forgotten your son, with all the rest? Gaspar! Gaspar!"

Olivares's eyes widened, and the swaying of his head stopped. The doctor forgot his surprise at the dwarf's words in wonder at the triumphant pride that illumined the face where the waxy touch of death already lay.

"Gaspar!" Olivares answered, clearly. "Another Lepanto in Portugal. All the world—mine—"

His voice was cut short as if a hand had been laid on his mouth. A shiver went over him, the hand in El Hermoso's clutch stretched and contracted once or twice. . . .

"Poor soul," said the doctor, closing the fixed eyes. "He was a power in his day. At least he died happy—you must find your comfort in that."

"Yes," the dwarf repeated, lifelessly, "I must find my comfort in that."

He rose and stumbled out of the room without looking back. He groped his way blindly from the house, repeating to all who hindered him, "Nothing is left here for me to do." As

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he plodded down the dusty road, shivering in the hot sunlight, he struck his breast with both fists, raising to the sky a face convulsed with pain and hate.

"Nothing here," he said; "but, by God, there is still the son!"

Quevedo sat by a western window, looking out on pleasant fields yellow with grain. Not even the warm sunset light could bring back an appearance of color to his face, and his hand was translucent as he lifted it to shield his eyes from the level rays. But for those quiet, luminous eyes, he seemed already the frail gray ashes of a man.

He turned his head with a smile of welcome as a servant admitted the dwarf and then closed the door, leaving them alone.

"You have rested?" Quevedo asked. "I was sorry not to see you when you first came, but my doctor is a tyrant. Well, I shall not have to obey him much longer—and, anyway, you are the better for a rest. You have had a long journey, Panchito—the old name comes easier."

"Yes," the other assented, wearily, "a long

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journey." A reluctant smile at the irony of things hitched his scarred lip. "A long journey to no purpose. He died mad, you know—and quite happy, thinking that he and Gaspar had conquered the world. This is all that my wonderful revenge has amounted to, after all—this!" He tore open his doublet and shirt, showing a deep sore where the iron had worn into the flesh—the bolt itself was gone.

"Did you leave it—there?" Quevedo asked, quickly, with a distressed catch of the breath.

Panchito shook his head drearily. "No. You will laugh when you know what became of my sacred relic." He crawled nearer to Quevedo, picking at the cloak that covered the poet's knees. "I came here by way of Las Espadas. God knows what I meant to do there—I was as mad as Olivares for a while, and the devil was driving me. I came softly under the smithy windows in the twilight—nobody saw me. Two young fellows of Gaspar's own age had brought him a dispute to settle, and he was doing it, sensibly, honestly, with no fuss—about as you might have done it. They took his judgment and went away contented, and he began to hammer. There

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was a kindness in his face that I had never seen there before—I'll swear he looked more like you than he did like—the other. I crept on to the house, for I wanted to understand—and then I understood. I heard the creak of a cradle, and Rosaria singing, a little old song that I had heard her mother sing to her:

Hammer and anvil, how merry they ring!
Shoes for the stallion that carries the King,
Shoes for the mule that the merchant may ride,
Shoes for the palfrey to pace with the bride,
Shoes for the post-horse—

and so on. Presently his hammering stopped and he came to the door, whistling the same little tune. At his step on the threshold she looked up with heaven wide open in her eyes and a finger on her lips. Then he went in and bent over her—well, that was all I saw. That was no place for me. I went away. He had left the smithy door unlocked, and I laid my bit of iron softly on the scrap-heap, as I went.”

Quevedo laid a gentle hand on the shaggy, gray head. “Better so—it was good for nothing but to kill. Let a man who has learned to live hammer it into shoes for a palfrey to pace with a bride. We do not seem to have

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been of much use, you and I—what have we tried to do but to destroy? We were made that way—we knew no better. To the scrap-heap with us, and perhaps—some day—good may come even of us for the little Gaspar and Rosarias yet to be born.”

“Poet!” jeered Panchito. But there was a choke in his mockery, and he furtively lifted the hem of Quevedo’s cloak to his lips.

THE END

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